



To cite this article:

Bula, Heidi. "Translating Marilynne Bertoncini's ode to artistic inspiration and collaboration in her poem *Adam&ve.*" *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 20, (December 2024): 104-114.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

Translating Marilyne Bertoncini's ode to artistic inspiration and collaboration in her poem *Adam&ve*

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An introduction to the poem

Marilyne Bertoncini's poem *Adam&ve*, composed just last year in December 2023, is an escape into the furthest reaches of the galaxy. In *Adam&ve*, she draws her audience into a "space" before time and humankind, which flirts with the Christian origin story of Adam and Eve, the first humans to be created. Stardust, "nebulous" dreams and existentialism pervade her verse and allow the sound and images of lone words to take centre stage. This article will delve into the translation I undertook of this poem for the AALITRA Poetry Competition of 2024 and how I, as both a lover of poetry and researcher at the University of Melbourne, have come to appreciate her poem within the body of Bertoncini's work and prolific career.

Unsurprisingly, this poem was not written in a vacuum. *Adam&ve* was the fruit of an artistic project led by visual artist Louise Caroline, based in Provence, and the electroacoustic composer Marc-Henri Arfeux from Lyon. Also residing in the South of France, poet, teacher, translator and *Niçoise*, Marilyne Bertoncini, embarked upon this project in 2023 for the artist's book "aux premiers jours du monde".¹ Unfortunately, this book is not easily accessible, however, Bertoncini's poem is to be understood alongside Caroline's distinctive "recadrages"² and Arfeux's diegetic and intergalactic-sounding work-specific composition.³

On Marilyne Bertoncini and her process

Adam&ve was therefore born from a contemporary artistic collaboration, which has been something of a regular occurrence throughout Bertoncini's long literary career. The heterogeneity of her texts published in both French (her home country) and international journals and anthologies is a testament to the numerous and prolific collaborations that she has engaged with overtime. As an editor of multiple journals, co-director of the international online review for poetry *Recours au poème*⁴, active poet and performer at literary festivals across the Mediterranean since at least the 90s, keen translator of Italian and English and teacher, Bertoncini has many strings to her bow. But most of all, when it comes to her literary productions, it is clear that her collaborations with the visual arts and music are what has distinguished her work. Consistently, she has engaged with these two arts, incorporating sound

¹ Before its publication, the manuscript was titled, "aux commencements du monde", which appeared in the AALITRA communications for the 2024 French translation competition. Now, the title of this work is "aux premiers jours du monde". This deceptively minimal change involves in fact a noticeable semantic transformation of the previous title. Instead of referring to the time in which the world began in vague and universal terms with 'commencements', the change to 'premiers jours' transforms this time into something specific, singular and past. The book has not been launched yet and is having some teething issues according to Bertoncini who doesn't think that it will be printed in great volumes. There will be an unveiling of the book at the Médiathèque Albert Camus of Antibes next January 2025. I have attached photographs of the book at the end of this article. See Appendix 1.

² Perhaps best translated to *reframings* in English. These are made of reclaimed cloths originally used to clean printing presses. Her interest in this process is inherited from her family who ran a printing house.

³ Marc-Henri Arfeux's composition for the book can be heard here: <https://soundcloud.com/marc-henri-arfeux/aux-premiers-jours-du-monde>

⁴ Started in May 2012, this journal can be accessed here at: <https://www.recoursaupoe.me/fr/actualites/>

and vision into her work, resulting in poems constructed by personal recollections of sensation and memory. These ‘inspired’ poems often lean on independent artistic creations quite outside the realm of her personal control and knowledge. In this way, her responses are always organic and refreshingly naïve and poignant, capturing the immediate and ephemeral in an artistic encounter. Many of her poems also draw connections with the Greek myths, revealing a desire to expand inner worlds into outer worlds and beyond. That is certainly what she achieves in her poem *Adam&ve*, in which, already, by the spliced biblical title, she creatively prepares her audience for her characteristic blurring between personal and universal, ‘I’ and ‘you’, ‘they’ and ‘us’.

On translating *Adam&ve*

When it came to translating her poem *Adam&ve*, I was aware that in some ways, I was embarking upon the writing of my own poem. Critically, Lawrence Venuti describes the work of a translator of poetry in this way:

To translate a poem, then, regardless of the language, culture, or historical moment, has [meant to] create a poem in the receiving situation, to cultivate poetic effects that may seek to maintain an equivalence to the source text but that fall short of and exceed it because the translation is written in a different language for a different culture. The poem that is the object of translation inevitably vanishes during the translation process, replaced by a network of signification – intertextual, interdiscursive, intersemiotic – that is rooted mainly in the receiving situation.⁵

Indeed, I knew that the translation I was going to produce could not be identical to the original work and in that way, would be an original work of its own. However, in order to most faithfully replicate the feel and style of her poem and its voice, I would need to carefully examine the poetic devices used and have a clear and profound understanding of the meaning of the poem. This meant considering a range of effects like tone, imagery, sound, rhythm and appearance, as well as the inspiration behind the poem and its overall meaning.

In my translation into English, I made a concerted effort to maintain the fluid and mystic qualities of her writing in French. I noticed that she achieved this through careful word choices and attention to lyricism. Of course, in the translation process, it was important to remember that a poem is not only a *read* work, but also a *performed* one.⁶ I paid particular attention to the sonority and musical dynamics in the French in order to offer a similar interpretation in the English. *Adam&ve* is also written in free verse, which arguably made this process easier, allowing me to forgo any rhyming, which, as we know, is a much more difficult task for the translator.

There are also visual aspects to take into consideration when translating Bertonecini’s poem. *Adam&ve* is made up of floating stanzas spread across the page. Some of the other visual effects Bertonecini uses include elements like the shape of the stanzas, the spacing, the lexical emphases and word associations made through formatting and other visual cues.

Ultimately, throughout the translation of her poem, I realised that there were three main effects to consider, which are also true of the translation of most poetry. These were: 1. meaning (semantics, semiotics and cultural references in the target or source language); 2. sound

⁵ Lawrence Venuti, “Introduction: Poetry and Translation,” *Translation Studies* 4, no. 2 (2011): 128.

⁶ The topic of “viva voce” in poetry can be further explored in publications like: Mildred Larson, Ed. *Translation. Theory and Practice: Tension and Interdependence* (Binghamton: State University of New York at Binghamton, 1991).

(rhythm and other aspects related to oral performance); and 3. appearance (formatting, spacing, visual associations and dissociations and word placement).

Inspiration & poetic effects

As a translator herself and a speaker of at least three languages, Bertoncini, like all multilinguals, must look at language from multiple points of view. This polyphony would be further amplified by her eclectic sources of inspiration. *Adam&ve* is an ‘inspired’ poem reflecting directly on prints by Louise Caroline for her book *Aux premiers jours du monde*. Whilst translating the poem, I was unaware of which exact prints inspired Bertoncini, so I decided to select a potential contender that was on the artist’s website. The work *Maternité* (fig. 1)⁷ seemed like a suitable support.

Judiciously splattered with blue and diluted red dye, this folded fabric monotype resembles the inkblots used by psychologists in the Rorschach test.⁸ Emerging from the bottom centre of a splayed rectangular canvas is a large bead made from the gathered fabric. Its yonic shape, coupled with the pink smatterings of ink point to childbirth and probably explain the title of the work. Emotional qualities such as pain and chaos can be perceived in the overall composition of the work and what look like blood stains, once again reminiscent of childbirth. Yet, the positive themes of union and creation are also evoked by the pink bead at the centre and the relative symmetry and freedom expressed through both the folding process the artist undertook to create the print and the application of the ink splodges themselves. This joy is, of course, another emotional quality associated with *la maternité*. Here, creation and chaos are at the heart of a work like this, and Bertoncini certainly explores similar themes in *Adam&ve*.



Figure 1: Louise Caroline, *Maternité* (motherhood), blue and red ink on fabric, 120 x 96 cm, 2019.

However, since writing this article, I have been in correspondence with the poet based in Nice and am finally able to reveal the identities of the artworks by Caroline that inspired *Adam&ve*. Not one, but two small scale dyed fabric squares were used for inspiration: one titled *Adam* and the other, *Eve*.

⁷ (Fig. 1.) Artwork by Louise Caroline, entitled *Maternité* (motherhood), blue and red ink on fabric, 120 x 96 cm, 2019, currently within the artist’s personal collection. To access more of her artworks, go to: <https://www.louise-caroline-art.com/galerie>

⁸ The Rorschach test was created to examine a person's personality characteristics and emotional functioning.



Figure 2: Louise Caroline, *Adam* (on the left), *Eve* (on the right), blue, green, yellow and red ink on fabric, dimensions unknown, but close to the size of a hand, 2023.

These swirling cool toned abstract works contain what looks like futurist figures at their centres, pushing against the masses of dye in a battle to stretch out and take up space across the fabrics. Bertoncini also mentions a third source of visual inspiration from a medieval miniature by the Flemish painter, Jean de Limbourg. This source, she explains, has been following her around for a very long time. A longer text accompanies the poem *Adam&ve* in relation to this work, in which she explores notions about infinity. As a miniature, this sumptuous gold leaf and lapis lazuli illustration occupies a very small section of an otherwise entirely blank page in the original manuscript (circa 1416). In the top left corner of the page, the delicate figures of Adam and Eve migrate across the illustration in various motifs, narrating the story of their banishment from the Garden of Eden.

This circular and dual journey is embodied by the kingdom of God, which is situated both within Eden, encircled by a golden orb or ring, and outside, with its spires reaching into the heavens of the blank page. This ring, symbolic of eternity, was also explored in an earlier publication of Bertoncini, entitled, *L'Anneau de Chillida* (2018).⁹ This book, like much of Bertoncini's work, was again inspired by an artistic source, this time, the work of the late Spanish sculptor, Eduardo Chillida. The concept of infinity has surfaced at multiple points within the last decade of the poet's career and it is unsurprising that this latest poem of hers is the tissue of past literary explorations.

Lastly, in my correspondence with Bertoncini, she emphasises a compositional quirk in the medieval illustration that allows for a more layered reading. To her, the Flemish artist intentionally played with the negative space of the blank page and the miniature scale of his "enluminure"¹⁰ to illustrate a sense of infinity, as the tiny couple appear to look out at an immense white void, represented by the blank page. This further reference to not only the Christian notion of eternity as life everlasting, but also to a perhaps more secular reading of infinity, is something that has inspired Bertoncini's latest literary meditations.

⁹ Marilyne Bertoncini, *L'Anneau de Chillida et le tombeau des danaïdes* (Mont-de-Laval: Atelier du grand tétras, 2018).

¹⁰ In English, we would call these delicate drawings *manuscript illustrations*. However, "enluminure" is a more interesting term as it relates to the Latin *illūmināre*, or to *illuminate*, which was the purpose of these illustrations, to illuminate texts often from the Roman Catholic Church.



Figure 3: Jean de Limbourg, *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry*, manuscript (Ms. 65), 294 x 210 mm (folio size), c.1416.

The poem

Returning to her poem now, it certainly explores Genesis and the story of Adam and Eve against a backdrop of the big bang or what the Ancient Greeks referred to as the moment chaos turned to order in the great cycle of entropy.¹¹ In the poem, she goes back and forth between the fatality of existence and the infinity of the universe with her stanzas taking the shape of sinewy images and sounds, much like a haiku, without an obvious head or tail. There is drama in her writing and suspense, conveyed by a rolling crescendo that reaches its summit at the middle of the poem, somewhere in between the lines – “la stellaire explosion” and “se délite et se forme” – and slowly declines after the mention of “la prison d’Eden”.

Although I clearly revelled in the literary reflections to be had in the process of analysing the meaning of this poem, the translation of grammar and syntax also occupied me considerably. However, admittedly, this was the part that felt more stylistic and intuitive for me of the translation process.

As Pierre Bourdieu observes when undertaking the translation of poetry, translators often seek to garner “poetic legitimacy”¹², dangerously distinguishing themselves from the original author of the text. This is indeed a worry, but this literary independence and experimentation is arguably, a necessary part of all successful translations of poetry.

Technical challenges

Despite its free-flowing form, Bertoncini’s poem presented a number of translation challenges. These challenges touched on common translation issues from French to English related to pronouns, syntax and grammatical tense.

¹¹ Steven Fry, *Mythos* (London: Michael Joseph, 2017).

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 51.

For example, where Bertoncini writes “une même chair, une seule bouche”, I wrote “same flesh, one mouth”. Now, this could have equally been translated to “one skin, one mouth”, or even “same skin/flesh, same mouth” for the purposes of alliteration, which is applied in the source text by the use of “une”. However, a clear distinction is made between the different adjectives describing the *flesh* and the *mouth*. Where possible, I tried to respect these lexical differences and opted to remain as close to the source text as possible. My use of *flesh*, instead of *skin*, also shows a similar attempt to maintain the same associations of meaning and imagery as in the French poem. Verb conjugations also proved difficult to translate with trying formulations like “sont à naître”, which I simply translated into the present tense to reflect a loose timelessness. The middle stanza in which the poem reaches its crescendo also proved obtruse. Here, I felt that more than anywhere else in the poem, the poetic effects of rhythm and sound mattered. This is why I chose to apply a more liberal translation of the verbs and adjectives used in the French. Although the musicality is certainly not identical in my translation, the same emotion and relative rhythm is there in those stanzas. This resemblance can also be found when listening to Arfeux’s musical recording for “aux premiers jours du monde”, which now not only interplays beautifully with Bertoncini’s French images and word sounds, but also the English translation.¹³

Conclusion

By analysing, translating and connecting with this poem on a personal level, I have been introduced to Bertoncini’s complex oeuvre, rooted in an assemblage of influences from the worlds of music, art and literature. Research into her work, brings to light a keen interest in writing about the personal and minute, which, in fact, conceals an even greater desire to address the infinite and universal. Her multilingualism and translations also reflect a similar desire to represent and possess multiple points of views in her writing, which is poignantly expressed in her fusion of Adam and Eve. In spite of the heterogeneity of her work and her many sources of inspiration, what distinguishes Bertoncini’s poetry is indeed its fusion, embracing many things, revelling in the chaos, but ultimately, finding both solace and strength in unity, where her multiple voices are able to fuse together and create one single exquisite voice, just like in *Adam&ve*.

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¹³ I made sure to write the English translation whilst bathed in Arfeux’s sound landscape, which made for a very unique translation experience!

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Fig. 2. Caroline, Louise. *Adam* [1st artwork], and *Eve* [2nd artwork]. Blue, green, yellow and red ink on fabric, dimensions unknown, but close to the size of a hand, 2023.

Fig. 3. Limbourg, Jean de. *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry*. Manuscript (Ms. 65), 294 x 210 mm (folio size), c.1416. Musée Condé, Chantilly.

Adam&ve

Nés de bien plus loin que l'Eden
pétris de la matière noire du Désir

Adam&ve

Une même chair
une seule bouche

le sang des étoiles bat à leurs tempes
dans l'espace-océan, l'éther mer infinie où les formes sont à naître
nébuleuses étoiles au chant de sirènes nébuleuses

la blancheur de leur corps sur l'encre de la nuit

avant les commencements
et les dieux des humains

délivrés
retrouvant dans l'espace
l'obscurité céleste
la stellaire explosion
multiple de leur corps
se délite et se forme
la dimension cosmique
niée par la Genèse
enfermant leurs semblances

dans la prison d'Eden

Or la voix des étoiles frissonne
Grelot de givre des étoiles où coagulent ces deux corps
issus d'une poussière astrale

Corps translucide de nébuleuses dérivant dans l'espace
méduses bras étendus en longue trainée de Voie lactée

zébrant le bitume indigo du vide universel
leurs cheveux de comètes
et leurs yeux de soleils fulgurent dans la nuit des espaces infinis

d'où le monde naquit

d'elle-lui
Adam&ve

Adam&ve

Born from somewhere more distant than Eden
kneaded from the dark stuff of Desire

Adam&ve

Same flesh
One mouth

the blood of stars beats in their temples
in the ocean of space, the infinite sea-like ether
where forms emerge
like stars swimming to the song of nebulous sirens

the white of their bodies against the ink black night

before the beginnings
and the gods of humans

unfettered & free
moving in space's
celestial obscurity
the multiple stellar explosion
of their bodies
fragmenting and forming
the cosmic dimension
denied by Genesis
locking their appearances

in the prison of Eden

Now, the voice of stars quivers
Bell of frost made from stars in which these two bodies coalesce
from stardust

Translucid body of nebulae
drifting in space
jellyfish with tentacles spread wide
painting the Milky Way

streaking the indigo bitumen of the universal void with
comets for hair
suns for eyes shimmering in the night of infinite spaces
where the world once began

from her-him

Adam&ve

What next? Marilyne Bertoncini will exhibit a series of photographs taken during walks throughout the city for her exhibition “A Fleur de bitume”, which will take place next year in January.

Appendix 1

Photographs taken by Marilyn Bertoncini of the book *Aux Premiers jours du monde*.

