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Translation of Marilyne Bertoncini's *Adam&ve*

SHIVA MOTLAGH-ELBAKRI

Translator of French and German into English

Marilyne Bertoncini's poetry frequently delves into themes of nature and the transience of human life. Her works are rich in sensual imagery, skillfully weaving the physical and metaphysical to create layers of meaning that delve into life, loss and continuity. Bertoncini's poem *Adam&ve* exemplifies this complexity through its existential, interwoven metaphors, as I interpret them. Translating this poem led me down a rabbit hole of research, as translators often find themselves doing in pursuit of the perfect word. Even after completing the translation, I still question whether my interpretation captures the poem as the author intended. This lingering doubt may be an inherent part of translating poetry, a reminder of language's limitations and the beauty of ambiguity. As a poet, teacher, and translator herself, Bertoncini captures this ambiguous experience of translation in her blog:

...c'est bien le même ETRE-ENTRE-DEUX que j'éprouve quand je traduis – c'est dans cet entre-deux que je vis, que je chemine, portant à la lumière (de mon écran) l'ombre des mots...

...it's precisely this 'BEING-BETWEEN' that I feel when I translate – I live and journey in this in-between, bringing the shadow of words to light (on my screen)...

(“Diary of Translations”)

As a native-English speaker, my reading of the French source text (ST) was laced with effort. The density of astronomical terms in French was as perplexing as their English equivalents would be for me. I still wonder if my choices, which leaned toward a broader interpretation, adequately honour the ST. My reading suggests that the ST intertwines two metaphors: one of celestial bodies and another of the first man and woman from the Abrahamic religions. In Bertoncini's depiction, the primordial couple occupies a space between being a singular hermaphrodite and two distinct beings who "find themselves in the space in between." Examining the ST closely, it seems that this 'being' shifts between plurality (*nés* - "[they were] born"), singularity (*Une même chair, une seule bouche* - "one flesh, one mouth"), and eventually, a visceral attraction that drives them toward full differentiation as the poem progresses:

their temples pulsing with stardust in the
infinite ethereal ocean where being are born
specks of stardust swimming
to the melody of sirens' nebulous calls

This union culminates in a “starry explosion” and the formation of an embryo that "layer by layer, takes shape" (*se délite et se forme*). While *se déliter* typically means “disintegrate” or

“dissolve,” I opted for “layering” to convey the imagery of a growing embryo. Here, and in relation to other elements of the poem, the disintegration of *Adam&ve*’s pure essence after succumbing to temptation seemed implied, so I leaned into the image of the formation of the first three embryonic germ layers in all of mankind.

After this union, the bodies withdraw, and we are pulled into an image of a foetus bobbing in amniotic fluid (“a translucent body of nebulae drifting in space”), before it is ‘born’ (“pierces the indigo bitumen of the cosmic void”).

Bertoncini’s brilliance lies in her seamless intertwining of celestial and physical imagery, each stanza representing a step in the journey of these ‘bodies’. Retaining this dual imagery while staying faithful to the ST was the greatest challenge in translating this piece. I recognise that the ST leans more heavily into astronomical imagery, while my translation accentuates the union of two people coming together to create life. This interpretive preference may be subconsciously influenced by my experience of new motherhood, which has shaped my recent perspective. This raises the question: “Is this faithful to the original?”

I find solace in Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction approach, which underscores the multiplicity and ambiguity of language, where words derive meaning in relation to one another (Derrida 158-159). Reflecting on this, I believe it is the sequence of the imagery in each stanza which provided the strongest foundation to support my interpretive choices. For Derrida, this interpretive act is not only acceptable but inevitable: a “perfect” translation is impossible, and each translation is a transformative process that produces a new text (Davis 16).

Regarding lexical and structural choices, readers may notice that I introduced four-line sections where the ST contained only three lines. In these instances, I allowed rhyme and rhythm to guide my word selection, introducing rhyme where none existed in the ST. This led me to split lines, particularly necessary for the lines including “born” and “call,” a rhyme that resonates in the Australian accent. Roman Jakobson’s theory of intersemiotic translation posits that meaning in art transcends literal language and encompasses various modes of expression (Jakobson 114). For poetry, this concept invites the translator to see the text as part of a broader aesthetic experience. In this case, I applied it to interweave the rhythmic experience of the poem in the context where it was designed to be paired with a musical composition.

In a similar vein, I translated *d’où le monde naquit* as “where beings take shape,” maintaining the rhyme scheme of this ST section. While a more literal translation would have been “from which the world was born,” I felt that retaining rhythmic cadence took priority. This decision, among others, reflects an intersemiotic approach, where the priority was to capture the ST’s sound and feel.

In translation, one often grapples with balancing a literal rendition and a more natural, fluent style. Early in my career as a translator, I leaned toward literalism, but Jakobson’s intersemiotic approach has encouraged me to engage with poetry as a multi-dimensional experience, where rhythm and sound are integral to meaning. Derrida’s deconstruction philosophy allowed me to embrace the boldness of my own interpretation. Translating *Adam&ve* has become both a celebration of poetic expression and a milestone in my journey as a translator, reflecting my evolving voice and confidence.

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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
nageuses 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 'n' eve

Born of something much further away than Eden
by the dark matter of Desire shaped

Adam 'n' eve

One flesh,
one mouth

Their temples pulsing with stardust in the
infinite ethereal ocean where beings are born
specks of stardust swimming
to the melody of sirens' nebulous calls

the white of their bodies amidst the ink of the night

before the Beginning and the
gods of men

relief!
finding themselves in the space in between
celestial darkness
starry explosion
a copy of them
layer by layer, takes shape
its cosmic dimensions
rejected by Genesis
capturing their image

in the prison of Eden

Then, these astral beings shiver
In an instant these bodies - made of stardust –
slow down, pull back

A translucent body of nebulae drifting in space
spiraling the Milky Way up to maturity

piercing the indigo bitumen of the cosmic void
their celestial outer case
and bright eyes light up the
night of infinite space

where beings take shape

from he 'n' she
Adam 'n' eve