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Ricochet

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From Translation to Addiction

A word sonnet is a fourteen-word, fourteen-line poem. No wonder we can call this short and compact form “organic,” because like a stone, this poem carries within it a whole world. Skipping lightly from page to page like pebbles over water, each of these word sonnets bounces off the others. While their form and essence are identical, their content and overtones differ. “Ricochet,” the dazzling poem that lends its name to this collection, seems to describe snow glinting and reflecting off itself, but it also touches the fascinating question of the meaning that resounds within its depths.

RICOCHET

Go
find
something
in
the
dark:
snow
reflected
off
itself,
a
ricochet
of
illumination.

LE RICOCHET

Pars
à
sa
recherche
dans
l’obscurité :
la
neige
se
renvoyant
sa
blancheur,
ricochet
d’illumination.

Several centuries before Seymour Mayne, the French poets Marc Papillon de Lasphrise (16th century) and Jules de Rességuier (19th century) both tried their hand at variations on the sonnet. Papillon

composed monosyllabic sonnets made of two quatrains and two tercets, limiting himself to one-syllable words. De Rességuier wrote sonnets using one monosyllabic word per line. Later the poet René Nelli took up the form and, in 1985, published a collection of monosyllabic sonnets. At the end of the 1990s, the Irish poet Augustus Young contributed to the development of this form by using it in his own writings, and serving as a judge in a monosyllabic sonnet competition. The English publisher, Menard Press, published the poems from the competition. Canadian poet Seymour Mayne's enthusiasm for word sonnets was born of this. I am very grateful to him for letting me join him in this affair by translating the fifty-seven sonnets in this collection.

Seymour Mayne's sonnets, like Augustus Young's, are neither traditional sonnets nor monosyllabic sonnets. Actually, they are fourteen-line poems, composed of either monosyllabic or polysyllabic words. Each poem contains a sentence, sometimes two. In this they resemble the ancient Greek monostiches: Ménandre's one-line poems and the poetic sentences of the Delphic Oracle.

When the time came to translate the English term *word sonnet* into French, I took all this into account. Author and translator agreed on "one-word sonnet" since it is clear that "monosyllabic sonnet" didn't fit: Mayne's poems were not necessarily composed of monosyllabic words! Furthermore, the sonnet imposes on the poet many more constraints than that of fourteen lines (number of feet, strophes, type of rhymes). A purist would find the term "quatorzain," a generic designation for any fourteen-line poem, to be a better fit. Nonetheless, I think that Mayne's poems merit the noble distinction of "sonnet." As beautiful and supple as the French language may be, it has no equivalent for the English term *monowordic*, which suggests that every line has only one word. In other languages, translators have kept the term *sonnet* and paired it with *word*: "soneto de una palabra" (Spanish), "soneta mila" (Hebrew). After much reflection, the elliptical expression "one-word sonnet" seemed most appropriate because it was also enigmatic.

Like the terms *word sonnet* and *sonnet d'un mot par vers*, or *monostiche éclaté en quatorzain* show us, Shakespeare's language can often be more concise than Molière's. I savoured the daunting challenge of translating fourteen English words into exactly fourteen French words. For a creative and supple translator who loves puzzles, this seemingly impossible task was not insurmountable. Additionally, when I was faced with the difficulties that these texts present, I understood that I too would have to enter into the dynamic and the technique of the ricochet, manoeuvring until the rebounding had played itself out. Rebounding means understanding and accepting that to be faithful to both the meaning of the poem and to the constraints of the form of the word sonnet, most of the time a word-for-word translation wouldn't work. I couldn't presume to keep either the original punctuation or word order. Rebounding also meant daring: in one instance I used a neologism, based on the Latin *pomeridianus*, in the poem "La poussière" ("Dust"). It is one of the most beautiful, but also one of those that proved most elusive.

DUST

The
dust
of
afternoon
fragrance
settles
on
your
skin
and
limbs
grainy
with
touch.

LA POUSSIÈRE

La
poussière
des
senteurs
poméridiennes
descend
sur
toi :
membres
et
peau
crissent
au
toucher.

For the reasons I mentioned above, another poem that defied translation was the powerful poem “Ground,” “Écrasées.”

GROUND	ÉCRASÉES
Who	Pour
claims	qui
this	donc
honed	est
silence	ce
where	silence
ice	affûté
and	de
rock	glace
have	et
ground	de
each	roche
other	mutuellement
down?	écrasées ?

But the poem that I believe is one of the most magnificent is the haunting sonnet, “Yiddish,” “Le Yiddish.” One of the most intense and most moving pieces in this collection, it reminds us of why Seymour Mayne is considered such a great poet: he restores speech to his Jewish ancestors, exterminated in the Holocaust. Its form, its content, its theme—everything in this text—needed to be deftly translated, and I hope that I have succeeded in recreating all its beauty and resonance.

YIDDISH	LE YIDDISH
Echo	Un
of	écho
whisper	de
as	chuchotements :
distant	d’innombrables
ghosts	fantômes

in	lointains
their	rêvent
millions	que
dream	les
the	vivants
living	reprennent
into	la
speech.	parole.

You understand that Seymour Mayne’s word sonnets, despite being short and impish, are far from being easily translatable light verse. Furthermore, English, the source language, is well-known for being more concise than French, the target language, for all its precision. Why did I not only agree to translate them, but then find myself unable to resist the challenge? Because these seemingly innocuous texts, admirable for their depth and complexity, are harder to translate than the words themselves, making the work of translation intoxicating. These word sonnets are probably the most arduous undertaking that I have ever been asked to do, and the most delectable, because these poems, and the translation challenges they present, worked on my spirit like a drug. I craved my daily fix of these poems and, each day, wanted a new one to challenge my translation skills. My brain, now hooked on these texts, wanted more. The poem “Substance Abuse,” “Abus de substances toxiques,” illustrates well the greatest “risk” that these word sonnets present: addiction. The road from translation to addiction was fourteen words long—but what words!

SUBSTANCE ABUSE	ABUS DE SUBSTANCES TOXIQUES
Literature	La
is	littérature :
one	l’une
of	des
the	toxines
least	humaines

damaging	les
human	moins
toxins-	nuisibles ;
try	goûtez
some	à
poetry,	de
will	la
you?	poésie !

Clearly the poet himself is no stranger to this addiction to word sonnets, and Seymour Mayne often peppers his correspondence with impromptu creations. Literary translation is a dialogue between and in two languages, a dialogue in which author and translator encounter each other through their shared love of writing. My own obsession with word sonnets led me, one sleepless night, to try it myself—just once—in honour of the poet who restored to these poems their noble pedigree. In turn, Seymour Mayne translated the poem “Nuit blanche” into English, demonstrating that word sonnets will continue to ricochet.

NUIT BLANCHE

à Seymour Mayne

Rien
de
tel
que
quelques
sonnets
pour
donner
un
sens

SLEEPLESS NIGHT

to Seymour Mayne

There's
nothing
more
rousing
than
a
few
word
sonnets
to

à
mes
nuits
blanches !

remedy
a
sleepless
night!

SABINE HUYNH

(Translation: Bernadette Gasslein)

