



PROJECT MUSE®

The Yale Anthology of Twentieth-Century French Poetry
(review)

Adam Piette

Translation and Literature, Volume 15, Part 1, Spring 2006, pp. 136-142
(Review)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tal.2006.0012>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/198518>

The Yale Anthology of Twentieth-Century French Poetry. Edited by Mary Ann Caws. Pp. 646. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. Hb. £30.

Now that the mighty twentieth century is done and dusted, it is natural to hope that publishers will start to fork out for big, definitive anthologies for the benefit of genre histories and area studies everywhere. This large-scale Yale anthology of French poetry is an indication that publishers think similarly. Unfortunately, such is the bulk of material written, published, and praised in the 100 years in question that it would be foolish to expect just 650 pages to do even a half-decent job. Yale went out on a limb somewhat in choosing Mary Ann Caws as editor for the project, given her strong bias in favour of a particular brand of poetry, but this turns out to be a sage and savvy decision on their part. A proper anthology of twentieth-century French poetry *has* to have bias, lots of it, so that at least one corner of the field is given the kind of coverage it deserves, and which students (presumably the main target here) need.

Caws' bias rolls her choices leftwards, towards the unruly territories of Dada and Surrealism, and also towards female poets, especially in the postwar selections. The selection criteria throw up fascinating material, not just automatic-writing Freudian gobbledegook of the furry teacup kind, but still as though this were an anthology conjured up at *table tournante* to the dictates of the shade of Breton. The 1946–66 section of the book is not entitled 'Cold War', not 'Existentialism', but 'The Death of André Breton'. Now that's what I call a reputation. Breton is a good poet, especially of the gamey love song, very much Apollinaire's boy in that sense; so making him presiding genius is no bad thing. The anthology is quite simply extraordinarily useful as a compendium of the surrealist tradition. It is of course not just that – we have the Valéry, the Saint John Perse, even Claudel (*hélas*). But they appear, by implication, as a necessary, if begrudged, context to what Caws clearly sees as the real story.

The book is not only an anthology of poetry, of course, but an anthology of translations. Each poem is Englished on the facing page. To have gathered together, by buying up rights and through commissioning, translations for 300-odd poems must have placed quite a strain on Mary Ann Caws' schedule. And with a project of this *envergure*, it is not surprising that what we get on the English side of the page is hit and miss – happily, more hit than miss. To minimize the misses, Caws wisely stuck, when she could, to a tried and trusted team of acquaintances for the majority of the translations, reliable and inventive people like Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop, Stephen Romer, Rosemary

Lloyd, Martin Sorrell, Marilyn Hacker, and Hoyt Rogers. Part of this strategy comes with the territory – many of the translations are drawn from the major existing anthologies, including Stephen Romer's 2002 *Twentieth-Century French Poems*, Marilyn Hacker and John Taylor's 2000 special issue of *Poetry* (under the title 'Contemporary French Poetry in Translation'), Martin Sorrell's 1992 *Modern French Poetry*; or they are reliant on the networking provided by the Waldrops' publishing platform, Burning Deck's *Série d'Écriture*.

But there have been a considerable number of commissions, and a certain concentration of material is in evidence from Caws' own stable of translations, including new work done in collaboration with Patricia Terry (whose 1975 *Modern French Poetry* is also acknowledged). And the sheer bulk of the book, its range and, may one say, its *cool* is a welcome breath of fresh air after too many rather earnest anthologies. Caws has gone out of her way to internationalize the anthology as well, without false exoticism, but with real political bite and aesthetic judgement, drawing on fine poets from everywhere in the francophone world, and this is one of book's great strengths. To have Senghor, Césaire, Meddeb, and Dib here may be predictable, but the fact they rub shoulders with Deguy, Char, Tzara, and Desnos, as well as with a babble of minor voices from across the world, says the right thing about French modernism and its various colonial and postcolonial aftermaths.

It is also a relief to read through the fat book and not be drowning in fake abstractions and woolly *grandes vérités*, the Yves Bonnefoy school of classicizing mysticism which has ruled the roost for so long. Bonnefoy is in the book all right, but mercifully briefly – the yawns are quickly stifled by the poems which follow, André de Bouchet's spacey chic, the sheer lunacy of a Bernard Collin prose poem (a silly dream of automatic sparrows and giant ants). Such juxtapositions are an editor's private joke, *bien sûr*, but work very well to change the accepted and acceptable sequences of literary history.

It is ironic, therefore, that the very best translation in the whole anthology, by *far*, a translation of such perfection, daring, wit, and luscious genius that I am still reeling from the reading and absorbing of it, should be a translation of that hoary old favourite of the *vieux style*, Valéry's 'Le Cimetière marin'. Only a very fine poet would really risk taking the task on, though – it is a devil of a poem to translate – but thank the Lord that Derek Mahon decided to do so. Mary Ann Caws is to be congratulated for having wheeler-dealered the translation into the book (not only, I presume, because Valéry was Breton's best man). The rendering is simply miraculous. Read and compare:

Comme le fruit se fond en jouissance,
 Comme en délice il change son absence
 Dans une bouche où sa forme se meurt,
 Je hume ici ma future fumée,
 Et le ciel chante à l'âme consumée
 Le changement des rives en rumeur.

But even as fruit consumes itself in taste,
 even as it translates its own demise
 deliciously in the mouth where its form dies,
 I sniff already my own future smoke
 while light sings to the ashen soul the quick
 change starting now on the murmuring coast.

Mahon's wit in translating Valéry's *changes* as *translations* is true to both sides of the joke – true to translation as such and to Mahon's particular transformations. Poems do consume themselves and die when translated, and it is sly of Mahon to imply that Valéry could somehow smell the smoke of the future bonfire Mahon would be making of his poem. It is also true, though, that 'Le Cimetière marin' becomes something 'deliciously in the mouth' in Mahon's Irish English: the lilt and accent in that sweet run 'demise' – 'deliciously' – 'dies', the enactment of the murmuring on the coast in the 's'-run ('sniff' – 'smoke' – 'sings' – 'soul' – 'starting-coast'), the wonderful line-break turn in 'the quick / change', the sturdy Swiftian-Yeatsian simplicities of diction married so mischievously and richly to Valéry's chanting syntax. This is no imitation, however. This is real translation, of an order rarely seen more than a few times in a generation. The Yale anthology is worth buying for 'The Seaside Cemetery' alone.

Though nothing quite matches Mahon after that (it's perhaps a shame he comes in on page 97 – we still have 500 pages to go), nevertheless there are some very fine things here. Still on the old fogey front, what a pleasure to have Eliot's Saint-John Perse represented:

Bitume et roses, don du chant! Tonnerre et flûtes dans les chambres! Ah!
 tant d'aisance dans nos voies, ah! tant d'histoires à l'année, et l'Etranger
 à nos façons par les chemins de toute la terre!

Roses and bitumen, gift of song, thunder and fluting in the rooms. O what
 ease in our ways, how many gestes to the year, and by the roads of all the
 earth the Stranger to his ways ...

How exquisite an ear is revealed in the switch of 'roses' and 'bitume', in the tiny expansion of 'flûtes' to 'fluting'; what cross-cultural wit in

replacing 'histoires' with 'gestes'. The little pun in 'ways', the careful psalm-like rhythms, the muting of Perse's over-eager exclamation marks – all these make for a real masterclass.

Other highlights are Ashbery's versions of Reverdy, Wallace Stevens' wonderful translation of Fargue's 'Une odeur nocture', a superb rendering of Saint-Pol Roux by Robin Magowan, Rosemary Lloyd's Bataille, Martin Sorrell's Desnos, Denise Levertov's Guillevic, Michael Sherringham's Frénaud, Keith Waldrop's Jabès, Charlotte Mandell's Meddeb, Marilyn Hacker's Nicole Brossard, and Rosmarie Waldrop's Emmanuel Hocquard. With consistent quality like this, Yale and Caws are backing a winner: French culture is needed in the 'monde anglo-saxon', like some strange Doppelgänger. Or rather English might need the changes of translation from this particular language more than from any other — as was the case once upon a time with the thirst for translation from Latin and Greek.

But more specifically, no poet should go through life without René Char, or without knowing some Apollinaire, or without having heard, at least once, a Desnos love song, or listened to Ponge on oysters, slate, blackberries, or to a Tzara riff to the woman he's with. These are such essential texts – not good or bad, but necessary. Translation is there to remind us of such necessities of life, and for that Yale and Mary Ann Caws are to be congratulated.

There are some caveats to be entered, just as necessarily. There are no composition dates for the individual poems, which is lazy. A great many of the mini-introductions Caws has written for each poet seem to have been cobbled together from the internet in great haste. The Beckett headnote, for instance, is a disgrace. Apparently 'during the Resistance, he was in Roussillon' – no mention of the fact that he was *in* the Resistance. And I was not aware that Beckett had written *Molloy* after *Malone meurt* and had published both in 1951, or indeed that he had written books called *L'Innommable* or *Comme c'est*. Still, it's good to have some of his self-translations here, including the haunting 'Je suis'. How to translate the title which crosses 'I am' with 'I follow' ('Je suis ce cours de sable qui glisse'), identity a shifting process of unmaking? Simply with the genius of Ol' Blue Eyes: 'My Way' ('my way is in the sand flowing'). The following is in the flowing; the self is in the Sinatra assertion turned fluid, pure process.

Other potted biographies are just as footling, with extraordinarily empty stress on who was *friends* with whom. The Picasso introduction fails to mention his communism. For the Mauritius poet de Chazal, we are told that he was 'schooled in engineering and wrote in French rather than in English, though his writing remained true to the exotic

land of his youth'. Worse than the non sequiturs is the assumption that none of the islanders could speak French despite 100 years of French rule, and the silly cliché about the land of his youth, which betrays shameful exoticizing.

There are difficulties with some of the translations too – again as a result of haste, and corners being cut in a vast project. Easy and cruel as it might be to list howlers, I can't resist this one. In one of the many translations undertaken by Caws herself, she renders 'soufflet' as 'bellows' in Saint-Pol Roux's 'Lever du soleil', which, since the poem is about the loved one's cheek, is surprising: it must mean 'slap'. This would be petty cavilling if it did not raise the problem of translating very difficult surrealist material. When the poem is densely allusive but not rationally structured, it can be something of a gamble to get the sense right. Even with the incomparable Breton, Caws can encounter stumbling blocks. It can't be right, however tempting, to translate (about the influence of a far-off land on the body of the lover) 'Doux à ta carnation comme un linge immatériel' as 'Sweet to your carnation like an intangible linen'. *Carnation* in French means a deep flush in the skin.

The problem occurs when, as in Breton's 'L'Union libre', the list of comparisons, surreally arbitrary as it has to be in order to *be* surreal, becomes a trap for the unwary. The poem lists the loved one's attributes in typical high random-metaphysical style (buttocks like sandstone, gladioli sex, savannah eyes, etc.). The randomness and the metaphysicality can create crossed wires, though, especially in the leap across the Sleeve. How to render this, for instance: 'Ma femme aux hanches de nacelle / Aux hanches de lustre et de pennes de flèche'? Surely not by: 'My love whose hips are wherries / Whose hips are chandeliers and feathers'. The comparison is slender at best, but must play on the curve of the boat's keel, so she has the hips like a wherry's 'hips' – not 'her hips *are* wherries' (this is why Breton has 'de'). Similarly, it is the *curve* of chandeliers and feathers which is being called upon, not straight metaphor. Breton is working with the quick visual language of the mind's eye, but not abandoning the rules of engagement of comparison as such.

Caws' translations are not often marred by such failures of tact, but the hastiness nevertheless shows, despite the proof-reading which one supposes went on. 'Coulisses' are not 'corridors' if the context is a theatre (Caws' translation of Aragon); 'si tu savais' in Desnos' poem of the same title *has* to be 'if you only knew' and not 'if you knew'; 'ton rire mange soleil pour lièvres pour caméléons' in Soupault's lion-tamer poem is pure acoustics, the word 'lion'

generating 'soleil' – 'lièvres' – 'caméléons', so cannot be left as the flat 'your laugh eats sun for hares for chameleons'; translating 'il se souvient du jour' as 'he remembers the days' in Jean Grosjean's 'L'Aïeul' is a mistake, as it robs the prose poem of the vital possibility that the Jewish old man is remembering the particular day his family were taken out to be killed by the Nazis.

But the choice of this kind of poetry, surrealist, edgy, difficult, inevitably exacts a price, and for the most part Caws does a sterling job. Her versions of Anne Hébert are very fine. Despite the Grosjean hiccup, her translation of his 'Désert à l'essai' is superb. She has strong and febrile versions of Jouve, of Eluard (very hard to get right), an excellent rendering of Soupault's 'Cinéma-palace', admirable command of Tzara's zanier Dada, good work on Damas, and on Joyce Mansour's sexy lyrics, and is consistently intuitive and compelling when translating poets like Tengour.

My only difficulty with the choice of poets comes in the last section of the volume – when the editor has to choose the post-1980s voices she thinks will hit the big time. Tahar Bekri is convincing in Caws' own translation – a passionate, moving, but channelled energy about a dangerous return to Tunisia after years of exile. Marilyn Hacker is also convincing in her advocacy of Guy Goffette. Otherwise the poets seem all of the same narrow type – young and pretentious acolytes of Bernstein and Ashbery. I would wager that the real poets are not in the pockets of powerful American mentors, but under all our noses, being extremely French.

The real test of a book like this is not its overt thesis (that Breton *is* twentieth-century poetry, that there are a lot of interesting women out there, that Franco-American relations are generating French poets), nor even the quality of the poetry, but the overall impression it gives of the strength and vitality of French verse over these extraordinary, difficult years. For me, the shape of the century was importantly about surrealism, as Caws proves; but surrealism as a weird, uncanny predictor of the violence and random death and horror of the Second World War. The war does not feature except obliquely in Caws' selection – but all the more tellingly for that, as in Deguy's 'La Ballade': 'l'ennemi dans la place nous amenait à nous trahir', translated beautifully by Clayton Eshleman as 'the enemy *on our own grounds* led us to betray each other'. The best of the poets, like Char, fought the enemy on their own ground, which included the territory of the poem – and some, like Desnos, fell victim to the evil, but not before leaving a legacy which would redeem the grounds of the very possibility of a free poetry. For helping me see that, and for this extensive set of essential texts about what Char called

(in William Carlos Williams' translation) the 'counterpoint of the void', the twentieth-century void, translatable our void too, I am grateful.

ADAM PIETTE
University of Sheffield

Serving Twa Maisters: Five Classic Plays in Scots Translation. Edited by John Corbett and Bill Finlay. Pp. xxxvii + 376. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2005. Pb. £12.50.

Only two of these versions of five classic plays might count as already well known. Robert Kemp's *Let Wives tak Tent* (1948), translated from Molière's *LEcole des femmes*, was once a staple of Scottish amateur theatre, and, according to one of the useful appendices supplied here by John Corbett and Bill Finlay, has been revived professionally eight times up to 2001. It has not however been printed for more than twenty years. *The Burdies* of Douglas Young (1959), translated from Aristophanes, achieved something like notoriety in its Edinburgh Festival production of 1966. But it has never again been professionally performed; it was printed privately in 1959, and not reprinted till now. Its fame, which is real enough, rests mainly on gossip. The other three have never before been printed. Victor Carin's version of Goldoni, *The Servant of Twa Maisters* (1965), has been four times professionally produced, last in Perth in 1983. *The Hypochondriack* (1987), Hector MacMillan's version of Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire*, was last produced five years ago in Edinburgh, but this was only its third outing. Peter Arnott's version of Brecht's *Mr Puntilla and his Man Matti* (1999) was produced in the same year in both Dundee and Glasgow. The last two are published from typescripts supplied by the translators. This kind of summary of contents and contexts makes the enterprise of the anthology sound parochial and its ambitions quixotic or reactionary; but the achievement of the translators, taken together, is a cause for wonder, and we owe the editors every kind of gratitude. So do the translators.

The title is adapted from Goldoni's. The 'twa maisters' served by these translations are on the one hand the Scots language and on the other the five classic originals. Being a servant with loyalties divided in this way is not a happy condition. Goldoni's servant Truffaldino is described at the end of the play (in Carin's version) as a 'rascal', a 'villain', and a 'twister', who deceives both masters. But though betrayal is a necessity of such double loyalty, happy outcomes are still possible. Of course, as ordinary servants cannot, translators choose their