

A Note on David Diop's "Un berger" in *le Temps du martyr*

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A NOTE ON DAVID DIOP'S
"UN BERGER" IN
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Quite often, we are told that poetry originally produced in any one language hardly retains its natural beauty and melody when it is translated into a different language. This fact has generally been acknowledged in the art of translation for a very long time. For instance, when we look back to the immediately post-Renaissance period of English letters we notice that Dryden (himself an avid translator of the classics into a contemporary idiom and a translation theorist) in his recommendation and emphasis of free rendering or paraphrase was voicing the concession of an age to this fact of the impossibility of an exact correspondence between source and

target texts in translation; it was also this same difficulty that Voltaire had in mind when he lamented that "translations increase the faults of a work and spoil its beauties". Even in our present century, Robert Frost has underscored the untranslatableness of poetry when he regards it as "what gets left out in translation". Apart from the cultural barriers which often stand in the way of the translator, the personal vision of the artist and the semantic shifts that he makes in order to adequately express his individual impression of life also defy a merely one-to-one transference of lexis in translation. However, no matter the initial obstacles that stand in the way of the translator in his art, he could gain a better understanding of any given text he has to translate by taking into account all the explicit and implicit details of its atmosphere. But in spite of such contextual clues, it is not uncommon for the translators whom we rely upon to provide us with 'faithful' renderings of works in foreign tongues to fumble in their assignments. The commonest mistranslations stem either from outright misreading or the translating from faulty source texts. The latter case applies to our recent discovery in the poem "Le temps du martyre" while we were studying the poems of David Diop contained in Professors Simon Mpondo's and Frank Jones's translated edition of the poet's *Coups de Pilon* (their *Hammer Blows*).

The present investigation is necessary because *Hammer Blows* is, thus far, the only English edition of Diop's poems which has attempted to bring together all the translated pieces scattered over many anthologies. This fact makes the volume important in spite of its often prosaic rendering of the poet's better-known pieces. Our main objective here would be to draw attention to the poem "Le temps du martyre" and the several translations of its last line as it is found in or derived from the pages indicated for each of the following texts:

David DIOP (1961): *Coups de Pilon, Poèmes*, Nouvelle édition augmentée. Paris, Présence Africaine, p. 34. (French edition)

David DIOP (1973): *Coups de Pilon, Poèmes*, Édition définitive, augmentée de huit poèmes retrouvés, Paris, Présence Africaine, p. 43. (French edition)

Léopold Sédar SENGHOR, ed. (1948) *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, Paris, Presses Universitaires, p. 174-175. (French edition)

David Mandessi DIOP (1975). *Hammer Blows*, Trans. and ed. Simon Mpondo and Frank Jones, London, Heinemann, p. 40-41. (Bilingual edition)

David Mandessi DIOP (1973): *Hammer Blows and other Writings*, Trans. and ed. Simon Mpondo and Frank Jones, Bloomington, Indiana

University Press, p. 40-41. (Bilingual edition-poems)

Claude WAUTHIER (1978): *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*, 2nd English ed., London: Heinemann, p. 191-192. (Quoted poem in French)

Samuel Adeoya OJO (1977): "David Diop: The Voice of Protest and Revolt (1927-1960)", *Présence Africaine*, N.S., n° 103, 3^e trim. p. 19-42.

The poem is quoted in full below in order to provide us with a basis on which to discuss the total emotional context within which the last line functions and from which it should derive its full meaning:

*Le Blanc a tué mon père
Car mon père était fier
Le Blanc a voilé ma mère
Car ma mère était belle
Le Blanc a courbé mon frère sous le
soleil des routes
Car mon frère était fort
Puis le Blanc a tourné vers moi
Ses mains rouges de sang
Noir
M'a craché son mépris au visage
Et de sa voix de maître:
"Hé boy, un Berger, une serviette, de l'eau!"*
(*Coups de Pilon*, 1961,
1971, p. 34, 43)

Firstly, our investigation revealed that Senghor, Mpondo and Jones (both editions), and Wauthier (and in fact most other available anthology translations) are not faithful, as far as content goes, to the source text as contained in both editions of *Coups de Pilon*, for the ninth line is completely left out of them both in French and in English. Secondly, and this is a fundamental element in our research, is that the noun "berger" appears with a lower case 'b' in Senghor and in both editions of Mpondo and Jones instead of the upper case 'B' as we have it in the above text of the poem which we take as the definitive source. Consequently, the latter editors translate the word as "an easy-chair". Objecting to this translation, Ojo argues that the translators missed the point in its entirety and he goes on to render it as "a shepherd's dog". Finally, Wauthier translates (or rather, glosses) it as "a French aperitif".

From these conflicting renderings, it is clear that some harm has been done by Mpondo's and Jones's fundamental error in mistaking the lower for the upper case 'b' in the original poem; more harm is even done by their deliberate improvisation of a translation of a word ("an easy-chair") whose French cognate is not in the source text from which it is assumed they worked. One may easily argue the possibility that in the choice of the case for their 'b' Mpondo and Jones may have worked with such

an early text of the poem as printed in Senghor's anthology (1948); but one should not forget that, in principle, as an anthology, this latter source cannot be regarded as a definitive text to be relied upon completely in the type of work which the translators had in hand. It is also clear that Ojo who probably worked with this translation got caught in the seminal befuddlement of these translators when he, after declaring their rendering of the word as ungrammatical, in his turn fails to take full advantage of the total emotional context of the poem in his translation. He explains the basis of his objection in the following words: "This word ['a shepherd's dog'] is the translation we have given to 'un berger'. We are convinced that the translation given by Mpondo and Jones in *Hammer Blows* is incorrect: "an easy-chair" (their word) is, rather "une bergère" (p. 31n.). This correction is quite in order; but its focus also displays the author's acceptance of the lower case 'b' as it forms the basis of Mpondo's and Jones's translation. In addition to this acquiescence, his rendering is not quite suitable because although "berger" which he prefers would translate as "a shepherd's (sheep) dog", it is not a suitable one in the context of the poem.

So, basically, the translation problem highlighted by the diverse renderings we have here have to do with the use to which the perceptive translator can put the specific atmosphere or context of any given poem in order to arrive at a translation which strikes a necessary balance between the spirit and the letter of the source and target texts. It is against the background of this prerequisite that Ojo's choice fails to satisfy the reader; if his word is to be taken as a denigrative term, it will only contribute to the weakening of the overall effect towards which the poem builds: the ultimate bathos meant to 'foreground' the unscrupulous hedonism of the colonial master even on the scenes of his atrocities. Equally, taken as he suggests, the word does not constitute a sufficiently keen term of abuse: a sheep-dog is virtually a metonymy for faithfulness and serviceability which are often fully recompensed. So, for the white man in the poem to turn towards the young man and say "He boy, shepherd's dog, a towel, and water!" would be an unfortunate choice of words after he had just accomplished such horrible acts as killing, rape, and enslavement. If the poem is read with adequate attention to the controlling tone it becomes easy for the reader to determine which words would or would not collocate in the last line in question; for instance, it becomes a matter of common (poetic or rhythmic) sense to know that the words "He boy" can only be followed by a command and not by an abuse or an apparently insipid appellation. In this light,

Mpondo's and Jones's English words "an easy-chair" would even have constituted a more tenable alternative if a cognate French word were present in the source text at all and if we were to assume that the white man in the poem was asking for a chair and wanted to sit comfortably as he washed the blood off his hands; but the case of the 'b' in "berger" and the gender of the word disqualify their rendering since, as Ojo has rightly pointed out, "an easychair" ("une bergère") is a feminine noun. It is against this general background that we regard Wauthier's translation as the most appropriate one within the context of the poem. His reliance on the definitive text in *Coups de Pilon* saved him from getting into the muddle responsible for the mistakes of the two other translators discussed. The proper case of the letter 'b' as we have it in his text makes it clear that the word is a proper noun (a name of a particular person, place, or thing): thus, a brand of a French appetizer called "le Berger". So the most appropriate translation of this last line should be: "Hey boy, a Berger, a napkin, some water!" (that is, "a Berger", as one would say "a Pernod", "a Ricard", "a Budweiser", etc.). This translation is suitable both from the grammatical and contextual points of view. It also fits very roundly into the characteristic structure of a typical Diop poem which moves from a catalogue of the white man's atrocities to a deflating last line which 'presents' in very concrete terms the latter's equanimity (or even glee) during and after these acts. It is a similar attitude on the part of the colonizers which evokes in the poet his well-known characterization of them in the poem "Certainty" (*Hammer Blows*, p. 29) as "...those who grow fat on murders/And measure the stages of their reign in corpses."

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