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Drops from black candles by Abdallah Zrika

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Mike Baynham
Drops from black candles

Abdallah Zrika
Qatarātu šumū 'in sawdā 'i

I

So I blew out the candle
to light the darkness

And I saw the sun
cut off from the light

And I saw doors
and I didn't see the houses

And butterflies
emerging from maggots
that writhed in corpses

And I was afraid my face
might be another's face
stuck onto mine

Struck with fear
when I saw my leg
resting on scorpions

And when I got to water
I searched for a mouth in the earth

And all I found was an earth
looking like a tortoise shell

And I cried out:
Hell is all that is left
of Heaven

Heaven annihilated
only fire is left

When I went absent
my hand alone
remained present

When I came back
I found my fingers
were tongues of flame

And I said:
ah if only you knew
how much sweeter night
is to me than day

Me I empty myself
but the glass is never empty

And I sang:
foot oh my foot
voluptuous heel

And when the woman arrived
I pinched out the candle

And I cried out:
forget your language
leave your tongue alone
to chew another language

And I thought of the sun
who never sees me naked

And in the forest
I saw the wind
but never the flute

And I wrote on the air
don't sing with the wind

(And at night
I saw birds pecking at breasts
but just at the nipples)

And I shouted to the ant
don't go back to your house
there is a jailer there
playing with his keys
as he waits for you

And in the water
I saw a snake coming
out of my mouth

And
black
black!
In my sleep
I saw a silence

ii

Give me a glass
so I can swallow
this emptiness

An arm
to measure out
this separation

Prepare me a bed
made of glass
so the night demons
will skid on it

I don't want to read letters
that don't rear up
before my eyes like nails

I will give my hand to this dog
who comes to cut some fingers off it

I will leave a lot of white in my writings
so the hooker can stroll through them
as she wills

(This is not a pen
but a pick-axe to demolish this poet
who oppresses me)

The ants will come to my funeral
and I will leave my grave for someone
who hasn't found a place to sleep
I will leave a lot of white in my writing
to throw light on the gloom that falls
with the night of words

I will leave white
for the day of your marriage

And I saw white fleeing from white
white fleeing from the wall
and I didn't see

And the wall fleeing from white
the earth fleeing from the ocean
and I didn't see

And the ocean fleeing from the fish
and the fish fleeing from its skin
and I didn't see

And I saw fear beat the cold to the ears
and the ears beat the eye to something

The something get there before the name
the name get there before the tongue

And the tongue comes out of the mouth
to enter another mouth
and I didn't see
and I saw a bedroom without a door
and a wall gobble up a woman's leg

And a window reaches an eye
before the other eye

A woman dead underneath a bed
and a bed on top of a live woman

A woman, a woman naked
on an earth that is all mirror
and I didn't see

And I saw the letter in human shape
and the line a straight path to hell
and the full stops forgotten between the words
and the paper an entry ticket
to the fire

All that I have seen
I didn't see up till now

iv

I want a bedroom
that can rest on me

And things
without name

A sea
where a wave
bursts into flame
and another rolls in
to douse it

And clouds
flaming in the sky

My hand
stroking my other hand

And a breast
in which I don't hear
the sound of mice

So come out from this leaf
which will become a tomb for you
soon enough

Come out
of your body

Come out
of everything

I have seen a tree
branching in flames

And flames
bursting out from a tongue

I left my body
only to see that my body
didn't look like me
leave then
and don't enter another house
your body
is your house

Don't
open a window
on the air

No

The maggots will come
and gnaw the mask
off your face

I have seen dogs
love wheels

Water
love writing

Me I love writing
but I don't love
sheets of paper

This sheet here

v

This page
is made of water

So cross to the footnotes
of this page

As for me
I will get dressed
to cover up a sign
on my body

And don't let the clothes
shut me up in the wardrobe

I got dressed
and forgot my hand

I got dressed
and your eye stripped me naked

I love
how water is naked

The tree's vulva

The rose
that falls asleep
between the thighs

You
don't let the earring
marry the ear

Nor the ring
become
the finger's vulva

Let your finger
play with the fish

Let your nipple on its rounded breast
stay far from the seed of the pomegranate

I don't want to hear a story
that begins with my head

Give me your body
so I can suffer in it

Give me a tree
so my flames can branch in it

At night I burn
and am quenched in daytime

Don't come
I will meet you by chance

Let your hand
lick the windowpane

The sea will suck out
the juice of your eyes

Let your eyes
dribble
onto the earth
Go
leave me

Leave me
like this page does

vi

Oh Time
be far from my wrist

The glass white and empty
the one I want to be close
to her breasts

If you see me standing
don't hand me
an empty chair

I will pick up the words with a fork
and lodge them in a cat's mouth

Oh cat
don't be scared of these trousers
which play alone on the roof terrace
tonight

I will lay my head
next to a matchstick
and sleep

(and I can't grasp a darkness
thicker than this candle)

And won't understand poets
any better than this earthquake

vii

I saw one of my eyes hungrily devouring the other
my hand ripping the lifelines from its palm
and a knife poking out of my ear
(I fled)
the lines of the notebook closing over my words

My finger stretches out to the keyhole's eye and blinds it

A mouse slip out of a vulva
snakes slither between my fingers
heading for my neck

My bed stretches out
towards the window ledge

And bottles with broken necks
come out of the stomachs of poets

Very long downy hairs
spring out of the earth
instead of plants

A donkey's head nailed
in a child's bedroom

More doors than windows
more eyes than heads
more language than mouths
more blood than water
more roads than houses

(And I never saw a single poet
though I did see a jailer)

A donkey running after
a terrified fool

A cat's head lodged
in the head of a child

A bird
pecking the belly of a pregnant woman

Darkness sticking into
the pupils

And when I wanted to write
my fingers twisted round my fingers

And I haven't written anything
till now!

viii

And I heard the hand ask
why these fingernails

And I heard the mouth ask
why these fangs

And I heard the head ask
why this hair

ix

Don't look at me with your eyes
for you will kill everything

Read me with your blindness

Lead me with your blindness
into the pleasure of things

x

Who did they leave this silence for
in which only the dogs bark

This street is very empty
apart from half an orange

We didn't eat that night
we didn't speak then
we did nothing that night
but a huge knife
appeared to us in our dreams

This candle consumes me
but doesn't consume the pain
which feeds on my face my features

Listen kids
what is heavier
your head
or your school bag?

Hey you who leave at three in the morning
take me along too
just like the icy cold carries you along with it

Time feeds
on the hand
on the fingernails
The candle feeds
on the face of night

The silence of stone
is the hardest thing

What if the sky's face
filled with our smoky pain
could also wrinkle!

Even if we leave with no returning
even if we all leave
we the blood sacrifice on stone
there are children here
not yet born
who will pass through this place

After a little while the sun
will gulp down water from the black night

And dawn's blue
will shatter a few stones

And the cold will have covered
the apple of our hands

The taste of our songs
will always stay that way

You too candle
stick out your long tongue
and speak
to kill time

Commentary

Literary Translation as *Agencement*

“A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light.”—Walter Benjamin¹

“Les poèmes d’Abdallah Zrika sont comme des roses sauvages qui auraient poussé parmi des immondices.” [The poems of Abdallah Zrika are like wild roses growing on rubbish heaps.]—Abdellatif Laâbi²

“I started at the age of twelve. I still see it in blue, the colour of the plastic cover of the notebook in which I write for the first time. In the sky there always seems to be a fig tree, close to my grandmother’s house. I used to write about it. There are two colours to this beginning: blue and the cold green of the fig tree.”—Abdallah Zrika³

Here the poet Abdallah Zrika, through whom I have chosen to explore the theme of vision/seeing, talks about how he began writing poetry. He starts indeed by seeing. Seeing “in the mind’s eye” as we say. Already we can understand that from the very beginning of his life as a poet, Zrika’s work has been full of things, particularly things seen: his blue notebook, the cold green of the fig tree, the sky. Later in the same interview he is asked “What is poetry” and further confirms this perception:

Why poetry? This is the same question as “Why life?” Poetry is something material to me. I consider words themselves to be material. I consider them to be like things, and for

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 263.

² Abdellatif Laâbi, Preface, *Bougies Noires, Traduit de l’Arabe par Abdellatif Laâbi*, Editions de la Différence, 1998, p. 7.

³ Ali Abdeddine and Shireen Hamza, “Between Green and Blue: a conversation with Abdallah Zrika.” *ArabLit Quarterly*, <https://arablit.org/2019/09/02/between-green-and-blue-a-conversation-with-abdallah-zrika/>.

this reason Poetry is oriented directly towards that which is foundational and directly affects the reader. It is incisive writing rather like the splitting of a boulder.

Zrika's poetry is a poetry of words and things, an elemental poetry, with very little if any abstraction in it. As he puts it again: "Poetry, for me, seeks that which is foundational, a negation of the difference between the word and the thing." These orientations of the poet to his work are highly relevant when it comes to attempting a translation of his poetry.

Born in Casablanca in 1953, Abdallah's early life was marked by poverty and precarity. The poet Abdellatif Laâbi points to the formative influence of these early experiences on his poetry: "Sa poésie en garde les cicatrices, qui dénoncent cette blessure originelle" [His poetry retains the scars, which cry out against this original wound.] He seems to write out of certain scars. As the poet Martin Harrison puts it in his "Letter from America to Ruark Lewis":

All such choices are

delicate, often made from damage or a wound
we carry, a palimpsest of
pale bruised cicatrice beneath

its crust of blood.⁴

Laâbi goes on to talk about Zrika's choice of language in the painful, exploratory task of probing and opening wounds: "les mots pour ce faire tournent le dos au lexique prétendument poétique" [The words to do this turn their back on a spurious poetic lexicon.] Here Laâbi the poet/translator concisely alludes to another important characteristic of Zrika's poetry, its turning away from conventional poetic registers, from the canonical, with its "poetic" topics, its select lexis and its embellishments: a re-inventing of the poetic self from the ground up. This

⁴ See Martin Harrison, *Wild Bees: new and selected poems*, University of Western Australia Press, 2008.

turning away from established poetic convention is something characteristic of modernist poetry in Arabic since the 1940s and 1950s, for example in the free verse of the Iraqi *aš-šīr al-ḥurr* movement of the 1950s.⁵ Arguably Zrika has carried this challenging tendency further than most.

Zrika started publishing poetry at the age of 20 to great popular acclaim⁶ and, in a period of political and social turbulence known as the Years of Lead, was arrested for disturbing public order and so-called crimes against Moroccan values and imprisoned for two years in 1978.⁷ Since that period he has become a prominent and admired poet in Morocco, continuing to innovate, most recently in prose poetry.⁸ His poetry and prose have been translated into French, including by Laâbi, but are not well known in English, though recent translations by Pierre Joris and Tim De May have started to remedy this.⁹

The poems I have chosen to focus on in this essay form a sequence of ten closely linked poems entitled *qaṭarāt šumū 'in sawdā 'i/Gouttes de bougies noires* [Drops from black candles], first published in Arabic in 1988 in a book entitled *farašātun sawdā 'u* [Black Butterflies], then again in 1998 in a bilingual Arabic-French collection *Bougies Noires* [Black

⁵ See Salma Khadra Jayyussi's "Modernist Arabic Poetry" in *Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by Mohammed Badawi, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 132–179.

⁶ Pierre Joris writes of the early success of his poetry with the younger generation in Morocco and audiences at his poetry readings which numbered in thousands (Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour, *Diwan Ifrikiya: Poems for the Millennium*, vol. 4, University of California Press, 2013, p. 715).

⁷ Associated with the radicalism in poetic style described above is a social and political contestation of entrenched social values and authoritarian regimes which meant that the path of a number of poets of the period led through jail, including his translator Abdellatif Laâbi, tortured and imprisoned for some ten years on political grounds for "crimes of opinion." The independent and adversarial stance is encapsulated in the dedication of Joris and Tengour's *Diwan Ifrikiya*: "To those poets of the Maghreb ad the Arab worlds who stood up against the prohibitions."

⁸ See Zakaria Azzair, *Taškīlāt dalāliya fī qašīdat an-našr bi-l mağrib: 'Abdalla Zrīqa* [Some Indicative Observations on Prose Poetry in Morocco: Abdalla Zrika] (2020). <https://www.poetryletters.com/>

⁹ A translation of the first poem presented here, translated by Pierre Joris, can be found in Joris and Tengour, pp. 711–13. Joris's translation of Zrika's "La Colombe du Texte" [The Dove-Text] appears in *Words Without Borders* (2016). Translations of Zrika by Tim De May appear in *Banipal*, (2018), *Asymptote* (2019), and *ArabLit Quarterly* (Winter/Spring 2019–20).

Candles], the translations being by Abdellatif Laâbi. I didn't want to come to Zrika's poetry through Laâbi's translations, wonderful as they are. I wanted to engage with the Arabic. Initially at least I thought of the French translations more as a way of cross-checking the sense I am making of the Arabic, rather as one might consult Loeb when starting to translate Horace. My practice as a translator (at least as I thought at the time) was to consult the French purely to check that my understanding of the Arabic, then put the French aside and focus on engaging directly with the Arabic original. As it turns out and as I reflect on the process here, I find myself a great deal more influenced by Laâbi's choices than I imagined. Thus my "translation space" involves the Arabic originals of Zrika, Laâbi's French translations and my own translations into English: the whole work filtered through a direct engagement with Zrika's Arabic.

Before discussing my approach to the translations in detail, a word on how I understand the theme of vision/seeing as it features in Zrika's poems. I make a semantic distinction between looking and seeing: looking being an active, volitional attending to some element in the environment, whereas seeing foregrounds the perceptual engagement with "reading the world/word," perhaps with associations of the wonder of "getting it" (there is a similar relationship between listening and hearing). In a very real sense looking precedes seeing. Seeing is what happens when you look, as a consequence of looking. It is possible both to see something you are not looking for and to look without seeing.

Seeing can also be connected with vision: "the inward eye, that is the very bliss of solitude," as Wordsworth put it. The seer, a term not much used these days, is one who has vision through the inward eye, not just of the here and now, but of things unseen/unseeable. Archetypally, the seer and their way of seeing is also connected to blinding and blindness. Blindness and blinding are important, indeed visceral themes, in these poems. This focus on inwardness, the inner poetic landscape or world in turn connects with another characteristic of Zrika's poetry. As the poet says in the interview with Abdeddine and Hamza quoted at the beginning of this commentary:

I consider the work of writing itself another translation, from the “internal language” of the writer to the language through which the text manifests. Translation is not the interior/soul of the text. The text transforms upon being read, first, and that too is the reader’s translation. Each reader has his own personal translation.

In his poetry Zrika connects his inner world with the outer world and with others through the transformative capacity of language. It is perhaps how he works on pain: as we can see his inner world is a tormented one. Laâbi in his introduction points out that Zrika’s poetry is *sui generis*, not emerging from the Arabic poetic tradition but something that cuts across, disturbs and deranges it. “Ce Marocain marginal la dérange assurément. Il ne ‘réjouit’ pas l’oreille arabe quand il s’y exprime. Il se tient à l’écart de sa grande musique. Pire il la rappelle au désordre.” [This marginal Moroccan certainly disrupts it. He doesn’t evoke pleasure in the Arab ear when he expresses himself. He maintains a distance from its musical grandeur. Worse still he calls it towards disorder¹⁰.] Of course, Zrika is not the only Arab poet in the modern period who has crossed the lines of the classical conventions and the expectations of poetry and suffered the consequences. Exactly the same critique, as Alkhalil shows,¹¹ was levelled at the poetry of the Syrian Nizar Qabbani some decades before Zrika was imprisoned for supposedly offending “the sacred values” of the nation.¹²

Zrika cuts across the expectations and conventions both linguistically and topically: by writing in everyday language using a relatively unmarked lexis, evoking often ugly and violent topics. His poetry will at times provoke in the reader a visceral sense of horror, repulsion. Not just seeing and vision, but excruciating images of self-harm, of damage to the organ of sight, the eye, the sucking dry of its liquids, that recall the eyeball razored in Bunuel’s *Le Chien Andalou*. Literal visions of a hell of self-harm and damage, experienced unflinchingly, through the

¹⁰ In a similar vein the poet Adil Latefi comments on a certain violence in Zrika’s poetic language (personal communication).

¹¹ Muhamed Alkhalil, “Nizar Qabbani: from Romance to Exile” (2005), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.889.4766&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

¹² *Words Without Borders* (<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/contributor/abdallah-zrika>), March 2016.

eyes. It seems that seeing is his hell. If the raw linguistic material for these poems comes from the everyday lifeworld and the patterns of daily speech, the poetic world that is evoked is very un-everyday, challenging and oneiric, what Laâbi describes as “un cauchemar lucide,” a waking nightmare.

The poems I focus on here are full of acts of seeing, expressed in the simplest possible way in Arabic: *ra`aytu* [I saw]. This is the language of story-telling, indeed we find this term repeatedly used in *Alf Laila wa Laila* [A Thousand and One Nights] and folk tales.

fa qālat lahu zawġatuhu min āyi šay`in taḍhaka fa qāla lahā šay`in ra`aytuhu wa sami`tuhu

His wife asked him “What are you laughing about?” and he replied “about something I saw and heard.”¹³

What is seen, however, is nightmarish: the poems are informed by an inner vision in which the violence of internal landscapes erupts into the visible, material world. And these eruptions are achieved through language, through poetry, eruptions plausibly impelled by the scars that Laâbi reveals.

A necessary preliminary for the translation process, however, is to explore the poetry not just in terms of the internal worlds it evokes and which it speaks to us, but also in its relationship to the culturally dominant, its politics. We need to locate and feel the weight of the poem, this boulder we are going to split and reassemble with a deconstructive/reconstructive pickaxe. Understood as practice, I think of the activity of translation as *un agencement* in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari.¹⁴ The translator needs to feel the weight of the text, scope it, in order to pull it apart and put it together. This *agencement* has the Arabic as *materia prima*, but also Laâbi’s French version and my emergent English version. There are also the informing cultural and linguistic politics and tensions of Arabic and French in post-colonial Morocco, the poles of which these

¹³ Anonymous, *Alf Laila wa Laila* [A Thousand and One Nights], Dār al Kutub al-‘Ilmiya, 2013, p. 9.

¹⁴ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Editions de Minuit, 2013, p. 197.

two poets illustrate so well: Laâbi writing in French, consciously echoing Baudelaire, Zrika saying unimagined/unimaginable things in a pared-down direct Arabic, cutting in a shocking way across established norms and expectations of poetic language and creating poetry of a startling beauty.

So how to translate this poetry that seems to take surrealism a step further, that has the potential to evoke horror and disgust as well as beauty or, as Zrika himself insists, horror and disgust as beauty? Laâbi in his short introduction twice refers to Zrika's poetry as "fleurs du mal" [flowers of evil], evoking as indeed does the title *Black Candles*, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, from symbolism to decadence. The French 19th century is indeed echoed in the imagery. But then so is the Lorca of *Poet in New York*. Psychic devastation breeds imaginative violence. Where Zrika's work diverges from the French 19th century, what irrevocably anchors it to the late 20th century and brings it closer to Lorca than Baudelaire, is the extraordinary simplicity of the language and the core lexis which he uses to create a strange, harrowing, extreme poetic world.

One parameter that emerges for this translation work is therefore not to embellish. The language of the poems more or less directly translated as both Laâbi does for French and I attempt to do for English is sufficient to allow these poems to display their energy, or as Benjamin would have it their light. These are poems that quite powerfully constrain how they can be translated.¹⁵ The translator is advised to stick with the core lexis that makes up Zrika's poetic world, their everyday language patterns, and allow the poems to speak for themselves. They don't need any help.

The second, connected to the first, is to respect Zrika's predilection for the concrete, so strongly expressed both in what he says about the poems and the poems themselves. Typically, as I have suggested, the poems constrain the choices a translator can make due to their vividness and directness, but there are

¹⁵ Having said this, the interested reader might like to compare my translation of the first poem here with that of Joris (Joris and Tengour, pp. 711–13). There are many instances of different translation choices made. Even in the context of an *agencement* approach to translation, there are many opportunities for translator agency.

always choices to be made. Here is an example in which Laâbi and I make different choices:

wa fakkartu fī-š-šamsi
ʿallati lam tarani ʿāriyan

J'ai pensé au soleil
qui n'a rien vu
de ma nudité

And I thought of the sun
who never sees me naked

Leaving aside a contrast in tense choices, I want to focus on translation choices for the word *ʿārin* (adj. = naked). Laâbi chooses to translate the Arabic adjective by transforming it into an abstract noun, *ma nudité* = my nakedness (Arabic *ʿarāʾī*). This is virtually the only occasion in these four poems where he does choose a more abstract form. Typically he stays as I do with Zrika's preference for the concrete world of things. But here he does shift, while in my translation I stay close to the original form of the Arabic, plainer and more direct. I highlight this not to make invidious judgements between the two translations but rather to point out that there are always choices between the more abstract and the more concrete. (There are also the affordances of particular languages to take into account, and French is a language gifted for abstraction.) Zrika is, as I have established, a poet who maximally prefers the world of things, for whom indeed words *are* things. I might add that this is also one of the few occasions in all of the poem sequence where Abdallah is seen: more often he is the seer. In the following section I will comment in more detail on some of my translation choices. I highlight four poems for discussion chiefly because they foreground seeing and vision. Where pertinent I comment on Laâbi's choices. As pointed out above, I find that my relationship with Laâbi's translation choices has changed in the process of writing this commentary. In the initial translation phase, I considered myself as using the French as a check or crib, launching off into my own translation. In this post hoc commentary phase I have gone back and scrutinized and inter-

rogated the French in more detail, leaving my translator's vanity aside and deciding at times that his translation choice was more effective than mine, thus leading me to revise my choices.

The following example illustrates what I mean by embellishment of an original simplicity:

wa-l-farāšātu
tahruġu min dīdāni-l-mawta

Des papillons
Sortant des vers
Grouillant sur les cadavres

And butterflies
emerging from maggots
that writhed in corpses

Both Laâbi and I, it seems, feel impelled to add to, embellish and make more vivid the original which is both lexically and grammatically simpler than the translations: translated literally the Arabic would read: "butterflies emerge from worms on/in/of dead bodies." Did we find the original too flat in translation? The translator can also be critic. We both insert in the translation a verb to make the latter part of the image more dynamic (*grouillant*, "writhed").¹⁶ The translation space for this work thus involves the dimensions of the original Arabic, the French and now my English. Laâbi is a poet as well as a perfectly fluent speaker of Arabic and French. The perfect companion in this task. The ideal translator. Even if at times I might prefer my choices, how could I not scrutinize and learn from his? This is an example of what I mean by the *bricolage* or *agencement* involved in assembling a translation, here three-way.

The poem finishes with a strange play on the trope of seeing: the poet in sleep sees silence. This is not an ordinary

¹⁶ It must be said that neither Zrika, Laâbi, or myself appear particularly knowledgeable about the life-cycle of the butterfly, which emerges from a caterpillar, not a worm or a maggot. The Arabic word *dīdān* can refer to caterpillars, worms and maggots. Caterpillars are not known to breed in corpses, while maggots and worms are. Both Laâbi and I choose to fly in the face of biology and follow the poetic logic of the original, translating *dīdān* as "maggots" or "worms."

world nor an ordinary seeing, rather a *dérèglement des sens* that approaches the visionary.

wa fī-n-nawmi
ra 'aytu šamtān
'aswadan 'aswadan

Et dans le sommeil
j'ai vu un silence
noir
noir!

And black
black!
In my sleep
I saw a silence.

To create a dramatic and rhythmic effect I reverse the order of the lines, but there is no embellishment of the original as such, any more than there is in Laâbi's French. Both translations echo the lexical choices and active conversational grammar of the original. The translations leave well alone. The image is left transparent to do its strange, *unheimlich* work. Seeing is problematized in this poetic world: something that is better done in sleep or darkness.

The architecture of poem III is built around an extraordinary tension between seeing/not seeing:

ra 'aytu / lam 'ara

J'ai vu / je n'ai pas vu

I saw / I didn't see

Having established the centrality of an agonized seeing in these poems, this poem confronts the reader with its opposite, not seeing. The poem is balanced between these poles. Zrika sets this up in what we now see as his characteristic starkness, and both translators follow. There really is nowhere else to go. There

is something grammatically and semantically strange about the phrase *ra`aytu / lam `ara*. It seems in all three languages to demand an object that is here withheld, leaving the reader in a strange existential void between the thing and its negation. This illuminates one of the characteristics of meaning making: once something is said, even if it is denied or immediately invoked, proved to be untrue, it still has an existence. These extraordinary images cannot be unsaid. But what the shape of the poem does is to trouble the notion of seeing. Again, I would defy any translator to do it differently, to mess around with the phrasing. The sensible thing is to follow where Zrika leads. Somehow Zrika's poetry seems, among its other characteristics, to be infinitely translatable. It is in this context that one could propose, echoing Benjamin, an "aesthetics of translatability."

Zrika's poetry here has an extraordinary transparency, due to its elemental focus, but we see at the end of this poem a trace of quite culturally specific reference which casts further light on the *cauchemar lucide* of these poems:

wa s-saṭra ṭarīqān mustaqīman `ila ḡahannama

.....
`ila-n-nāri

La ligne, route droite vers l'enfer

.....
pour le feu

and the line a straight path to hell

.....
 to the fire

There is a Qur'anic reference here with *ṭarīqun mustaqīmun* echoing the phrase *ṣirāṭu-l-mustaqīmi*—"the straight path (leading the faithful to salvation)." Here the path leads *`ila ḡahanama*—"to hell," echoed at the end of the verse by *ān-nār*—"the fire": a synonym for hell. Sitting behind the nightmare is the vision of hell.

Poem VII inhabits a crisis of seeing. Its imagery breaks down into a distressing series of violences inflicted on the body, making the reader squirm sympathetically: auto cannibalism,

piercing, blinding. In a startling surreal image, a mouse squeezes out from a woman's vulva.¹⁷ Again, the foundational logic and indeed materiality of seeing is violated when the poet "sees" one of his eyes devouring the other. These lines from Lorca's *Poet in New York* also evoke the violence of seeing as witnessing:

*Y sé del horror de unos ojos despiertos
sobre la superficie concreta del plato*

And I know the horror of eyes open
On the defined surface of the plate

The eyes here, like Zrika's, are beyond sleep, awake and required to witness: witnessing is another dimension of Zrika's seeing. But what is more shocking than Lorca's image, whose damage we read as external to the poet, is that in Zrika's poem what he is witnessing is the violence done to the poet himself, self-harm. His notebook closes on his words. At the end of the poem his fingers are wrapped around his fingers and he has written nothing.

In poem IX, the poet is addressing another person and the focus now is, exceptionally, on looking but not seeing. The poet adjures this other not to look (*la tan zur bi 'aynayka*), expressing a fear that looking will cause some terrible damage, that looking kills. Instead the poet invites the other to read him through blindness, again actualizing a play with seemingly irreconcilable polarities. In a moment of exceptional gentleness, the poet invites this other through their blindness to lead him into the pleasure of things. The poet's agony is scopic, an agony of seeing. It seems that it is only through cancelling sight that it is possible tenderly to experience the pleasure of things.

Pleasure, a wonderfully onomatopoeic word (*lada*), is connected to *laḏīd* (delicious) said in everyday parlance of food). The mouth literally fills with saliva in pronouncing it. The /l/ of Laâbi's *volupté*, itself a characteristically Baudelairean

¹⁷ The original Arabic *faraġ* can mean hole, crack or vulva. Laâbi translates this with the explicitly sexual connotation as *un sexe* and I concur. The Buñuel-like potential of the image is lost if a mouse squeezes out of a simple crack: the ambiguity however indexes once again Zrika's playfulness.

word (“*luxe, calme et volupté*”¹⁸), captures it well. The word rolls around in the mouth. My initial choice for this phrase was “pleasure” but in writing this commentary I have come round to “delight.” Both words have this liquid /l/ which rolls around pleasurably in the mouth. For me “delight” also has an echo of Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, something of which I discern in Zrika’s work. This suggests another, indexical, dimension to embellishment: the lexical choice in my translation indexes a work in the European visual heritage, just as Laâbi’s *volupté* indexes Baudelaire.

The final poem in the sequence (X) moves from the mute agony of seeing to that of speaking. Speaking that connects inner with outer.

*’ayyātuha āš-šam ‘atu
maddī lisānaki ṭawīlān
wa-nṭiqī
li taqtulī-l-waqta*

*Toi aussi bougie
sors bien ta langue
et parle
pour tuer le temps*

You too candle
stick out your long tongue
and speak
to kill time¹⁹

These are poems that translate themselves, that urgently demand to be spoken in a particular way. Uncompromising, they leave little room for maneuver for the reader/translator: they can’t be fancied or prettied up. Grotesque repeated images

¹⁸ Editor’s note: Baudelaire’s “Invitation au voyage,” quoted here, is translated by A. Johnston on page 61 of this issue.

¹⁹ *li taqtulī* is misprinted in the 1998 bilingual addition as *li taqlī*. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing this to my attention, to El Mustapha Lahlali for linguistic advice on the point and to Adil Latefi for enabling me to consult the 1988 Arabic edition to confirm this. For help with the transliteration of Arabic my thanks to Sarali Ginsburg.

of auto-cannibalism, self-harm, blinding, materialize pain. As readers/translators we are suffering through the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, transfixed with illicit pleasure and violence: Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud. Hellfire not far. Yet through the Buñuel-like, Burroughs-like savagery of the hallucinatory images, the song-lines are also strong. Beauty breaks through. Beauty is perceived not through the destroyed organs of sight but through blindness, another visionary kind of seeing that enables a tender reconnection with things. Coming through at the end, the injunction, at once bleak and affirmative, is to speak. Speak to kill time.

Conclusion

This commentary is informed by an approach to translation which sees translation not just as the relation between two texts or even three. What I have called elsewhere a practice approach to translation involves an *agencement* of the influences and factors that fold in together to construct a new object.²⁰ I suggested earlier, not facetiously or metaphorically, that Zrika's poetry demands to be translated in a certain way. To that extent the text is also an actor in the *agencement* as is Laâbi's French translation and eventually my English one. Also in play is Laâbi's and indeed Zrika's saturation in French as well as Arabic literature, the sociolinguistic and political relations that pertain between French and Arabic in postcolonial Morocco and the language politics of Arabic itself, not to mention the politics of poetics in the Arab world.

My personal take on poetry translation is that it is a commitment to *poesía sin fronteras/poésie sans frontières/poetry without borders/ šī'r bidūn ḥudūd*. My preferred format for poetry in translation is bilingual, as in the collection I have drawn on in this work, where original and translated texts face each other on the page, and this too drives my approach to the translation, becomes part of its *agencement*. I was pleased to discover that Abdallah Zrika is of the same mind:

²⁰ See Mike Baynam and Tong King Lee, *Translation and Translanguaging*, Routledge, 2019.

These days I do not try to read a poem translated from English, for example, without looking up the original text, even if I find it difficult. I believe that language is the other that wishes to see itself in the mirror of another language. (Interview with Abdallah Zrika, *ArabLitQuarterly* 2019)

To see yourself in the mirror of another, even if that other is blind. Perhaps especially if that other is blind. In this translation I come to recognize that I have benefitted from two mirrors, the Arabic mirror of Zrika's poems and the French mirror of Laâbi's translations. These poems remain a profound and provocative reflection on the nature of seeing and being seen, of the pain and damage of seeing, as well as of the possibility of healing through and beyond language.

Source texts:

“Abdallah Zrika—portrait d'un poète.” *Voix de la Méditerranée*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjcLb17krSI>

Zrika, Abdallah. *Farašātun sawdā`u [Black Butterflies]*. Casablanca: Editions Toubqal, 1988, pp 21–58.

-----, *Bougies Noires, Traduit de l'Arabe par Abdellatif Laâbi*. Editions de la Différence, 1998, pp. 54–115.