

# War in the Garden: Reading and Translating James Fenton's Poetry

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# War in the Garden<sup>1</sup>:

## Reading and Translating James Fenton's Poetry

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I first came across James Fenton's experimental Oxford poems, his "found" poems, 25 years ago, subsequently discovering a very varied body of work that is lyrical and political, seemingly simple while highly sophisticated, sometimes resorting to restraint and understatement, sometimes quirky, surrealistic, unbridled. But it was his powerful war poems, the creations of a would-be hedonistic traveller caught in a physical—and mental—trap in Southeast Asia in the early seventies, that moved me to study and translate his poetry and to publish *Côté guerre côté jardin: excursions dans la poésie de James Fenton* (Greaves 2016). My aim here is to present briefly some of the salient points of discussion in that book, in particular Fenton's poetry of witness, the notion of the "skin-voice", derived from psychiatrist Didier Anzieu's "skin-ego" (*moi-peau*), and its corollary, what I call "pellicular translation".

Educated at a public school and at Oxford, where he met Christopher Hitchens and Martin Amis, among other well-known writers, and became an activist on the Trotskyist Left, Fenton has always balanced conflicting sides to his personality. An erudite, passionate critic of art, theatre and poetry, a writer of opera librettos and a book on gardening, he is also a man of action. A freelance journalist then foreign correspondent for the *Guardian* and the *New Statesman* in, especially, Southeast Asia, Fenton earned himself the title of "writer as lunatic"<sup>2</sup>, adept at finding himself in *All the Wrong Places*, to quote part of the title of his 1993 collection of travel essays<sup>3</sup>. Part humanist, part hedonist, drawing on a variety of styles and genres ranging from modernist collage to love lyrics to light verse to socio-political ballad narratives, featuring among others a teenage Khmer Rouge soldier or a Manila gangster, Fenton writes a poetry of witness. Although not included in Forché and Wu's 2014 anthology, *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English 1500-2001*, his poetry constitutes, to quote the authors' definition of poetry of witness, a "living archive" (Forché & Wu 26) that testifies to an experience of the extreme which, I contend, is not limited to the war poems but is felt throughout his oeuvre. His poetry

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this title from an article by the poet (Fenton 1993).

<sup>2</sup>The phrase was coined by editor Bill Buford: "For example, ten years ago, James Fenton went to Indochina to see the fall of Saigon. Just days before the North launched its invasion in the South, James Fenton could be seen strolling casually into an area occupied by Vietcong soldiers, sharing a coconut with them while noting the sound of approaching South Vietnamese army vehicles on patrol. And when Saigon did eventually fall, he not only joined in the looting of the US Embassy, but, on hearing that the first North Vietnamese tank had appeared in the city rushed out of his hotel, flagged it down, and hopped on the back. This I regard as lunatic conduct." (Buford 5).

<sup>3</sup> *All the Wrong Places: Politics on the Outer Edge of the Pacific Rim*. (Fenton 1988).

confronts the horrors of the 20th century, such as Nazism in “A German Requiem”<sup>4</sup> (1983) and the Khmer Rouge genocide in the Cambodia poems, and visits various places of extreme tension or political violence such as Iran, Jerusalem or Tiananmen Square. In the case of the Cambodia poems, poetry was the form he ultimately turned to when the travel narrative he had planned proved too painful to write<sup>5</sup>. The handful of poems he wrote instead are marked with the seal of experience, yet discreet and self-effacing, very different from the confessional strain that had entered British poetry via American poets in the sixties, epitomized perhaps by Sylvia Plath’s posthumous collection *Ariel* (1965). Fenton’s poetry is concerned with the suffering of others, framing his own disillusionment not merely as a personal defeat but, in the aftermath of the war in Vietnam, as a generational traumatism.

## Out of Danger

The opposition between war and safety, and the presence of two poles in Fenton’s work, is suggested by the titles of his two principle collections of poetry, *Memory of War and Children in Exile: Poems 1968-1983* (1983) and *Out of Danger* (1994). These titles partly reflect the poet-journalist’s decision to stop covering war zones and move back to Britain, out of fear of a kind of war-zone addiction, as Fenton declared in a radio interview<sup>6</sup>. Although a number of the poems in *Out of Danger* are set in places of high tension, he had returned to Britain and would succeed Seamus Heaney as Oxford Professor of Poetry from 1994 to 1999. However, the phrase “out of danger” is polysemic, meaning both *away* from danger, in safety, and constructed out of danger, where danger becomes a raw material like wood or stone. It can also mean “from” or “because of” as in “out of spite” or “out of anger”. This is highly suggestive of the reciprocal influence of the “war” and the “garden”, where the garden is a metaphor for the aesthetic or aestheticist strain in Fenton’s poetry, and “war” is the voice of witness, residual in times of peace.

The Cambodian and Vietnamese war poems display an “English” restraint and approach the horrors of war through euphemistic strategies such as an English nursery rhyme in “Cambodia”<sup>7</sup> (1983), or the use of part-traditional part-experimental techniques in “Lines for Translation into Any Language”<sup>8</sup> (1983) and “In a Notebook”<sup>9</sup> (1983). Such methods contribute to a euphemising effect as discussed in relation to the Shoah by philosopher Giorgio Agamben, according to whom resorting to *euphemein*, while a necessary strategy for the avoidance of pain and horror, can also—in the case of the words “holocaust”, “incomprehensible” or “unutterable”, for instance—amount to shying away from precise naming and an eye-level confrontation with the facts (Agamben 76). In the case of Fenton’s poetry, euphemistic techniques, often linked to childhood, act as a filter and are enabling in the sense that they enhance the reader’s readiness to approach the recalcitrant matter of contemporary history. Moreover, the reader is, as it were, not left alone to digest the facts but accompanied as it were to the edge of the precipice... and back again, out of danger, like Dante the pilgrim with his guide Virgil, by an articulate humanism. In each of the following examples, taken from “Lines

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<sup>4</sup> (Fenton 2012, 4). All the poems quoted here are taken from this collection.

<sup>5</sup> “And if the present book has a haphazard, aleatoric element, some of that is intended, some not. The section on Vietnam was written in the years following the fall of the South. During that time, I had intended to include a full account of my experiences in Cambodia. But I found it too painful, during the years of the Khmer Rouge regime, to touch that subject, and by now it is too late.” *All the Wrong Places*, idem., xiv.

<sup>6</sup> *The Echo Chamber*, presenter Paul Farley. Series 6, Radio 4, 13 December, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> (Fenton 2012, 14).

<sup>8</sup> (Fenton 2012, 20).

<sup>9</sup> (Fenton 2012, 15).

for Translation into Any Language”, “Cambodia” and “Dead Soldiers”<sup>10</sup>, the poem is brought to a close under the aegis of a human presence responding with contained emotion to the tragic events that the poem steps back from:

- 11) When the victorious army arrived, they were welcomed by the fire brigade.
- 12) This was the only spontaneous demonstration in their favour.
- 13) Other spontaneous demonstrations in their favour were organised by the victors.

(“Lines for Translation into Any Language”, 1983)

Set during the fall of Saigon, the poem ends on the repetition of “spontaneous demonstrations in their favour”, with the second occurrence contradicting the first (“the only...”, “other...”), thereby ratcheting up the bitter irony. Concise reporting is combined with a stance, a restrained yet appropriate expression of sickening disgust and sadness. The following blunt statements are again structured around repetitions, this time parallelisms and chiasmus, formulating a contained outrage:

One man to five. A million men to one.  
And still they die. And still the war goes on.

(“Cambodia”, 1983)

And here the poet-journalist takes his leave of an impenetrable Cambodian reality with what can perhaps be remembered, rationalised, reported or drily surmised:

For the prince was fighting Sihanouk, his nephew,  
And the Jockey Cap was ranged against his brother  
Of whom I remember nothing more  
Than an obscure reputation for virtue.  
I have been told that the prince is still fighting  
Somewhere in the Cardamoms or the Elephant Mountains.  
But I doubt that the Jockey Cap would have survived his good connections.  
I think the lunches would have done for him—  
Either the lunches or the dead soldiers.

(“Dead Soldiers”, 1983)

The “dead soldiers” are both the war casualties and empty bottles of French brandy, redolent of the French colonial heritage in Indochina, the title phrase thus returning with a muted boomerang effect and dry humour to condemn imperialism.

## **Cross-pollination**

Fenton’s poems—those dealing with socio-political themes but also certain of the love lyrics and short self-analytical fables—are haunted, through a process of cross-pollination, by the experience of war, in particular by the sense of guilt for involvement in a (collective) misreading<sup>11</sup>. Fenton had gone to Southeast Asia in the hope of witnessing a communist victory; he witnessed two within the same month of April 1975, one in Phnom Penh and one in Saigon,

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<sup>10</sup> (Fenton 2012, 17).

<sup>11</sup> Fenton’s poetry could be said to help clarify the “map of misreading” of twentieth-century history. Cf. *A Map of Misreading 1975*. (Bloom 2003).

and was deeply affected by the ensuing catastrophe in Cambodia, a country he had come to love:

The villages are burnt, the cities void;  
The morning light has left the river view;  
The distant followers have been dismayed;  
And I'm afraid, reading this passage now,  
That everything I knew has been destroyed  
By those whom I admired but never knew;  
The laughing soldiers fought to their defeat  
And I'm afraid most of my friends are dead<sup>12</sup>.

(“In a Notebook”, 1983)

The repeated phrase “I’m afraid” is noteworthy; it is a polite, euphemistic formula inadequate to the scale of horror depicted, thus throwing that horror into relief, while at the same time enacting the encounter between the Cambodian catastrophe and the idealistic, well-heeled young Englishman. The chiasmus “knew...destroyed / admired...knew”, in which the accentuated open vowels of the middle terms foreground the outrage, moral and intellectual, encapsulates with classical symmetry the collapse of knowledge and self-knowledge brought about by the misjudgement concerning the Khmer Rouge. Meanwhile the word “dismayed”, similarly euphemistic in its modern acceptation, echoes throughout the stanza in “void”, “afraid”, “destroyed”, “admired”, “afraid”. The lexeme also occurs in the later poetry and comes to seem emblematic of an experience both personal and generational.

In the much-admired “A German Requiem”, set in post-war Berlin, the poem stages a twisted mourning process. While the living construct a new life in denial of the past, seemingly only half alive as they collude in a deadly institutional amnesia ironically commemorated by special rites, the dead seem poignantly alive, their makeshift graves marked by the plaques on the doors of their former homes:

But when so many had died, so many and at such speed,  
There were no cities waiting for the victims.  
They unscrewed the name-plates from the shattered doorways  
And carried them away with the coffins.  
So the squares and parks were filled with the eloquence of young cemeteries:  
The smell of fresh earth, the improvised crosses  
And all the impossible directions in brass and enamel.

‘Doctor Gliedschirm, skin specialist, surgeries 14-16 hours or by appointment.’  
Professor Sargnagel was buried with four degrees, two associate memberships  
And instructions to tradesmen to use the back entrance.  
Your uncle’s grave informed you that he lived on the third floor, left.  
You were asked please to ring, and he would come down in the lift  
To which one needed a key...

The seductiveness of the poem’s form is such that the reader is brought to collude in the characters’ neurosis and invited to share in an experience of the kind of denial of truth that collective memory draws on, in its transmission of history<sup>13</sup>. Transmission and memory are also brought into focus in “A Staffordshire Murderer”<sup>14</sup> (1983). Set in Lichfield in the Midlands, surrealist imagery redolent of Monty Python and Beatrix Potter is used to explore the ways in which society embellishes its own perverse foundations, finding a teleology for crime in

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<sup>12</sup> (Fenton 2012, 15).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Australian journalist John Pilger’s critique of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick’s documentary films entitled *The Vietnam War* (2017). (Pilger 2017).

<sup>14</sup> (Fenton 2012, 33).

institutional violence, political, military or religious: “Surely these preachers are poisoners, these martyrs murderers?”

These poems can be contrasted with the long poem (196 lines) “Children in Exile”<sup>15</sup> (1983), in which a genuine healing process unfolds involving a group of deeply traumatised Vietnamese and Cambodian refugee children. The speaker predicts that, unlike the inhabitants of Berlin or Lichfield, these children—who are exiles, separated from the social structures they were born into—will not be able to forget. Yet, he notes, they are growing up with a positive image of America. Fenton doesn’t leave the reader to ponder this paradox (“From five years of punishment for an offence / It took America five years to commit / These victim-children have been released on parole. / They will remember all of it.”), but articulates it with reference to W.H. Auden and counsels empathy:

Pretending to work, I retire to the study  
And find a copy of *The Dyer’s hand*  
Where I read: ‘An immigrant never knows what he wants,  
Only what he does not want.’ I understand

What it is I have seen, how simple and how powerful  
This flight, this negative ambition is  
And how a girl in exile can gaze down into an olive grove  
And wonder: ‘Is America like this?’

For it is we, not they, who cannot forgive America,  
And it is we who travel, they who flee,  
We who may choose exile, they who are forced out,  
Take to the hot roads, take to the sea

Although not all of Fenton’s poems enact a lengthy healing process as this one does, the children’s recovery mirroring and motivating the speaker’s evolution, most nevertheless include what could be called a healing function. This can be understood as a process of intersubjective mediation and seen in relation to psychiatrist Didier Anzieu’s concept of the “skin-ego” (*moi-peau*).

## Skin-voice

Didier Anzieu introduced the notion of a psychic envelope into French psychiatric circles in the seventies, and a translation of his book as *The Skin-Ego* was published in 1989 (Anzieu 1989). My study of James Fenton led me to develop this concept further and devise a similar notion, which I have called the “skin-voice” (*voix-peau*). This notion proves helpful to a reading of Fenton’s poetry as it casts the poetry’s musical effects of rhyme and rhythm as a sound envelope or sound bath (*bain sonore*), which engages the reader on a level beyond or below articulate language, that of prelinguistic babble or baby talk (into which the nonsense verse of one or two of Fenton’s poems, such as “Here Come the drum Majorettes!”<sup>16</sup>, almost flows over: “There’s a Gleb on a steppe in a dacha. / There’s a Glob on a dig on the slack side. / There’s a Glubb in the sand (he’s a pasha). / There’s a glib Glammaglob in your backside”). Anzieu’s theory relies on a conception of the prelinguistic stage of a child’s development in which infant and mother mimic and interact with each other’s voice. It is this interactive “sound envelope”, constructed inter-subjectively through playful prelinguistic vocalisation, that provides the foundation for the “psychic envelope” of the future individual and which, according to Didier Anzieu, has

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<sup>15</sup> (Fenton 2012, 21).

<sup>16</sup> (Fenton 2012, 108).

many functions in common with skin. Thus, both skin and skin-ego contain the individual, provide protection from external aggression, are porous and allow for exchanges between inside and outside, and so on. The skin-voice of poetry such as Fenton's appeals to the skin-ego by reactivating this period of pre-linguistic elaboration, re-positioning the reader both in and out of articulate language. In the case of Fenton's poetry this re-positioning is not excessively destabilising and the reading experience as a whole can be said to reinforce the skin-ego, to "heal" it if you will, "containing" or "holding" the reader's psyche reassuringly while enabling it to move beyond its protective "membrane".

The psychiatrist's notion of a "group envelope" is also highly relevant to this poetry which, through its use of light verse and classical forms as well as popular forms such as narrative ballads and rap, is for the most part an accessible poetry. Auden, Fenton's mentor, considered light verse a more reliable indicator of the differences in sensibility of different eras than serious poetry, because of its reflection of the taste of the public rather than that of the poet (Carpenter 1981, 231). Fenton's poetry, which draws on simple vocabulary and repetitions and, in some cases, comedy and humorous rhymes, achieves something of this generational appeal of light verse even though its themes are serious. Although it experiments with varied techniques, the syntax is not fractured or disconnected, and rather than the extreme decentering techniques of postmodernism, or of French contemporary poetry writing in the wake of Romanian poet Paul Celan (who wrote in German), Fenton's forms are not disconcerting and allow the reader to tread more familiar ground.

Indeed, the peculiar characteristics of the skin-voice lie in its capacity to resonate culturally and bodily<sup>17</sup> while registering images of war, such as the fate of the refugee girls, the enumeration of the dead, the bombing of the cemetery. Fenton's use of euphemism is a kind of negotiation with the reader, articulating the horror and the guilt of the young ideologue caught up with by history, and enabling the reader to receive this testimony of dismay. He thereby enriches collective memory in a lyrical-epic gesture that contributes to a fragmented historiography of the postcolonial aftermath and the Cold War.

In the 1994 collection, *Out of Danger*, the inflection taken after the dense war poems involves a release of tension: some of the love poems almost achieve light-heartedness, and some poems are bafflingly nonsensical. A hybridisation in terms of poetic techniques takes place and there is a move towards narrative ballads and the use of increasingly diverse registers. In "Cut-Throat Christ or the New Ballad of the Dosi Pares"<sup>18</sup> (1994), for instance, the speaker inhabits the Manila underworld:

*There's a Christ for a whore and a Christ for a punk,  
A Christ for a pickpocket and a drunk.  
There's a Christ for every sinner but one thing there aint—  
There aint no Christ for any cut-price saint. [...]*

In "Here Come the Drum Majorettes!" (1994) the wordplay and nonsense confuse the satire:

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. George-Arthur Goldschmidt, German writer and translator, on the contrasting sensory experiences of different languages: "One of the properties of the French language is perhaps that it slips naturally within the physical intimacy of the speaker. My mother tongue, on the other hand, German, in which I of course am as fluent as in French and which I also use for my writing, has never, not even in childhood, given me this sense of fusion, as if German left less space for the individual but nevertheless forced one to participate to its sounds in a way that demands more physical effort: one has to breathe in deeply to speak German, and stretch one's rib cage." My translation. (Goldschmidt 1999, 140).

<sup>18</sup> (Fenton 2012, 96).

There's a girl with a fist full of fingers  
There's a man with a fist full of fivers.  
There's a thrill in a step as it lingers.  
There's a chance for a pair of salivas— [...]

One short poem is entirely written in Tagalog. In spite of this diversity, after the experience of Cambodia, something of a change has occurred to the quality of language, similar perhaps to the words born of pain described by the writer-character in Aharon Appelfeld's *L'amour soudain*:

“Words not linked to a source of suffering are not words but straw. All these years I have been moving towards places where I don't belong, towards words that were not born within me.” She wanted to ask him what he meant by “words that were not born within me.” Ernest guessed her thoughts and said: “Words that were not born of my own pain” (Appelfeld 2004, 103).

Whether it be his own pain or that of other people, Fenton's words thus come to cohere through their music as a sort of “group envelope” or collective skin-voice. If they are to be translated into another language, what is required will be a “pellicular translation” (*traduction pellissienne*), a poetic translation capable of resonating through the rhythms and culture of the target language in such a way as to reinforce a new collective skin-ego, enabling the readers in the other language to share the Englishman's dilemmas while reactivating their own memories of war and, possibly, being brought to question their own thinking.

### **Pellicular translation**

With the notion of pellicular translation, I aim to define a translation strategy which should not be thought of as the elaboration of an equivalent text but as an extension of the psychic sound envelope of the poem, stretched to embrace a wider community. It can helpfully be seen in terms of an overall metonymical shift rather than a metaphorical one, based on the principle of contiguity as much as analogy, on *displacement* rather than the *replacement* of one text by another. The notion of pellicular translation takes its cue from Henri Meschonnic's emphasis on orality in literature and translation, and on his notion that the unit to be translated is not the discrete word, or linguistic sign, but the continuous discourse<sup>19</sup>. The skin-voice is the product of the orality of the poem and a poetic discourse designed to articulate catastrophe, which awakens the body through rhythm and prosody; it is a touchstone to the psycho-sensory dimension of our relationship with language. Moreover, the emphasis on Anzieu's psychic envelope in translation brings into play the personal history of the translator, who shuttles back and forth between languages and creates what might be seen as a bilingual, or rather interlingual, skin-voice. It is this voice that the reader of a translated text is reliant upon, a hybrid comprised of the voice of the author and the interlingual one of the translator, that is, with a text that fixes that voice at a certain moment, but which bears the brunt of countless restless crossings back and forth.

Given this aim of extending the sound envelope of the poem, thereby pursuing the attempt to contain and reinforce the psyche, in translating Fenton's poetry I have given precedence to metrics over rhyme, on the grounds that metrical rhythm, whether regular (the same number of syllables, typically an even number, to a line) or irregular where appropriate, is a given of

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<sup>19</sup> “The unit, for poetics, is something continuous—rhythm, prosody—; it is no longer of the discontinuous order, where the very distinction between source language and target language meets up with the opposition between signifier and signified. The targeter forgets that a way of thinking [une pensée] does something to language, and what it does is what is to be translated. And there, the opposition between source and target is no longer pertinent. Only the result counts” (Meschonnic 1999, A. Pym trans. 2009).



traditional French poetry and helpful to the elaboration of a sound envelope in this language, although I have welcomed rhyme wherever possible. The poem “In a Notebook” (1983) is composed of pentameters which alternate feminine and masculine rhymes or half-rhymes (consonance), except for the last three lines of each stanza, which are all feminine. I have translated these lines into alexandrines, which was a challenge, as some of the English lines are very dense, such as “From which the morning sun drew up a haze”. I have also dropped the masculine/feminine alternation, which would not be significant to a French ear unused to the alternate stressed and unstressed syllables of English accentual-syllabic verse. I have rhymed the final couplets of each stanza (there are five in all), and, rather than the narrative effect of the English syntax, allowed a more paratactic syntax to emerge. I have looked for sound similarity and contrast, and tried to find a voice that combines the gentle simplicity and delicate yet devastating precision of the English poem, by thinking of it as spoken in one continuous breath, while at the same time hindering the natural flow by a certain awkwardness and compactness of the syntax (“une rivière que surplombaient les arbres”, “c’est un ponton en forêt dans une clairière”...). Here is the first stanza:

*There was a river overhung with trees  
With wooden houses built along its shallows  
From which the morning sun drew up a haze  
And the gyrations of the early swallows  
Paid no attention to the gentle breeze  
Which spoke discreetly from the weeping willows.  
There was a jetty by the forest clearing  
Where a small boat was tugging at its mooring.*

C'est une rivière que surplombaient des arbres,  
Des cabanes sur pilotis longeaient les berges;  
Au matin le soleil soulevait une brume,  
Et les spirales des premières hirondelles  
N'avaient que faire de cette brise tranquille  
Qui bruissait doucement dans les saules pleureurs.  
C'est un ponton en forêt dans une clairière  
Où un petit bateau tirait sur ses aussières<sup>20</sup>.

Resorting to a metrical form such as the alexandrine may seem a strange choice for modern poetry, nevertheless it enhances in my opinion the sense of creating an intersubjective space. As with writing constraints as practised and theorized by writers of the Oulipo group<sup>21</sup>, translating into alexandrines both restricts and liberates, combining within the same words a discursive energy that is both impersonal and personal, such that the translated words become intensified and foreground their double status of belonging and not belonging to the translator, or for that matter to the poet.

In the following poem, a piece of light verse in trimeters entitled “God, a Poem”<sup>22</sup> (1983), the twelve-syllable line was to prove insufficiently restrictive, in my view. The first translation

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<sup>20</sup> (Greaves 2016, 113).

<sup>21</sup> “The primary function of writing constraints is to stimulate creation: in limiting the imagination, they paradoxically reveal to the writer the extent of his or her freedom, which explains their efficiency where the production of texts is concerned. The text surges up beneath the pen, here and now, pushed by an external necessity that enables the writer to put up a resistance to internal forces which could prove adverse.” Paul Fournel, Postface to *Dear Reader*. D. Bellos trans. London, Pushkin Press, 2014.

<http://oulipo.net/fr/usage-de-la-contrainte/> (in French).

<sup>22</sup> (Fenton 2012, 43).

(below), in alexandrines, is too loose and baggy; the second is composed of decasyllabics and includes irregular rhyme or half-rhyme, giving a more satisfactory result:

*A nasty surprise in a sandwich,  
A drawing-pin caught in your sock,  
The limpest of shakes from a hand which  
You'd thought would be firm as a rock,*

*A serious mistake in a nightie,  
A grave disappointment all round  
Is all that you'll get from th'Almighty,  
Is all that you'll get underground.*

**1** - Une vilaine surprise dans un sandwich,  
Une punaise prise là, dans ta chaussette,  
La main la plus molle que l'on puisse serrer,  
Que tu croyais solide comme un chêne.

Une grave méprise dans une nuisette,  
Une déconvenue à tout point de vue  
C'est tout ce que tu obtiendras du Tout-puissant  
C'est tout ce que tu obtiendras dans le caveau.

**2** - Un intrus malvenu dans un sandwich  
Une punaise au fond de ta chaussette,  
Une des poignes les plus molles que  
Tu aurais pensé ferme comme un roc.

Une sérieuse méprise en nuisette,  
Une déception à tout point de vue—  
C'est tout ce que tu auras du Très-Haut  
Tout ce que tu auras dans le caveau<sup>23</sup>.

In some cases though, the rhyme cannot be neglected. The following love poem, “Hinterhof”<sup>24</sup> (1994), is a sort of sophisticated nursery rhyme using ordinary words like those from traditional pop songs, “near”, “dear”, “true”, “new”, alongside a series of metonymical pairs, often doubled with effects of homophony and sound patterning: “rainbow / rain,” “wind / windowpane”, “fire / hearth” and so on. In French an equivalent lexical ordinariness would risk lying dead on the page, were it not for abundant internal rhyme and rhythmic effects:

*Stay near to me and I'll stay near to you—  
As near as you are dear to me will do,  
Near as the rainbow to the rain,  
The west wind to the windowpane,  
As fire to the hearth, as dawn to dew.*

*Stay true to me and I'll stay true to you—  
As true as you are new to me will do,  
New as the rainbow in the spray,  
Utterly new in every way,  
New in the way that what you say is true.*

*Stay near to me, stay true to me. I'll stay  
As near, as true to you as heart could pray.  
Heart never hoped that one might be  
Half of the things you are to me—  
The dawn, the fire, the rainbow and the day.*

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<sup>23</sup> (Greaves,149).

<sup>24</sup> (Fenton 2012, 57).

Reste près de moi, je resterai près de toi,  
Aussi près de moi que tu m'es cher suffira,  
Près comme l'arc-en-ciel de l'eau,  
Que le vent de l'ouest du carreau,  
La flamme du foyer, la rosée de l'aurore.

Sois sincère avec moi, je le serai pour toi—  
Aussi sincère que tu es extra ira,  
Extra comme arc-en-ciel dans l'air,  
Extra de toutes les manières,  
Extra la manière dont tes mots sont sincères.

Sois près de moi, sincère avec moi—je serai  
Aussi près, aussi sincère qu'un cœur voudra.  
Jamais cœur n'espéra qu'on soit  
Le quart de ce que tu es pour moi—  
Le jour et la flamme et l'arc-en-ciel et l'aurore<sup>25</sup>.

With this translated poem, the language seems at times to fork and reveal its double allegiance to self and other, with the translation of “new” by “extra”, for instance, in the second stanza, and the deviation from “New the way that what you say is true” to “Extra la manière dont tes mots sont sincères” (“Great the way what you say is sincere”). The choice of *extra* fulfils a metrical constraint while generating sound patterning within the stanza (*moi, toi, extra, ira, extra, extra, extra...*), as well as the cultural echoes of Léo Ferré’s well-known ballad, “C’est extra” and the revolutionary song “Ah! ça ira, ça ira ça ira”, which loops back to the English poet’s revolutionary politics. Rather than perceiving this as an act of domesticating rewriting (one language / culture replaces the other, with a view to making the translated text more readily accessible to the reader), this example illustrates what I mean by pellicular translation in that it heightens awareness of the body in (its) language. For instance, “Aussi sincère que tu es extra ira” is slightly awkward to say: should one link the vowels ending and beginning the last two words or separate them? The hesitation may be due as much to syntax as to phonetics, but the effect, I would contend, is to “prick” this French skin-voice, testing its sensitivity. The French-attuned ear might also pick up the pun “ex-trahira”, with bittersweet humour, adding a cynical note to this display of elation as language takes the lead—while mirroring metatextually the themes of betrothal and betrayal common to love and translation...

Taken from Fenton’s 1987 collection *Out of Danger* “Hinterhof” seems to foreground the contradictory meanings of the title: set in a safe place, away from danger, while being made out of danger, out of that experience. Although not a combatant, Fenton’s war poetry was born of his own pain, and empathy, and behind the chiming buoyancy in this poem there lies a seriousness, a vulnerability. Its German title, “Hinterhof”, meaning back yard or back courtyard, is suggestive of a permanently quiet sombre space behind the cheery façade, redolent of Appelfeld’s opposition between “straw words” and words “born of [one’s] own pain”. It is this sombre note that the translation aims to re-enact beneath the froth, for instance with the slow articulation of the polysyndeton in the last line: “Le jour et la flamme et l’arc-en-ciel et l’aurore”.

We have seen that Fenton’s experience of war in Southeast Asia deepened and intensified his poetic language, to the extent that much of his later poetry seems to read as words of mourning, while the “garden” side has always been there, pulling towards exuberance and a lighter note. Both sides contribute to a poetry at once personal and political, grounded in the body and the body politic. Its “translatability”—to borrow a term from Walter Benjamin—appeals to the

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<sup>25</sup> (Greaves, 157).

skin-ego and seems, through the meeting of languages in translation, to produce not so much a *reine Sprache* or “pure, universal language”<sup>26</sup>, as a (mis)fitting skin. That is, a language of translation stretched by the pull of interlingual contradictions, recalling Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt’s portrayal of the translator: a person wrongly accused, who has presumed to step out of his/her natural element, whose non-transparency is congruent with the experience of a speaker under pressure, about to burst into utterance:

Meeresrauschen am Matterhorn, they used to say: the sound of the sea on the Matterhorn! Such is the fate of whoever has to say in French what he hears in German. There he stands, in the middle, between the two, like Georges Dandin in his garden, breathlessly flapping his arms. He is like a wrongly accused man and is bemused by his non-transparency: come and take a look at the German in me and you’ll understand everything; everything is crystal clear in me—how come you know nothing about it? This is the translator in the initial situation in which the need to speak is felt, at the exact point at which language comes about<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> “[...] all kinship of languages that goes beyond historical derivation is based on this: that in each of them individually one thing, in fact the same thing, is meant – something, however, that cannot be attained by any one language alone, but only by the totality of their mutually supplementary intentions: pure, universal language” (Benjamin, 301).

<sup>27</sup> (Goldschmidt 2013, 170), my translation.

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