

# 'Le Sillage' by Jules Supervielle

Working with images – Years 10–11



*About the author...*

## **Jules Supervielle 1884–1960**

Born into a French-Basque family living in Uruguay, he was raised by his uncle in South America before being sent to France at age 10; he remained there except for the war years.

He wrote imagery-rich poems and novels, including *Le voleur d'enfants* (1926; *The Man who Stole Children*). He died in Paris on 17 May 1960.

I

Listen while your teacher reads you the text of this French poem. Some of the vocabulary may be unfamiliar, but it's important to get a sense of the mood and atmosphere of the poem.

## **LE SILLAGE**

**On voyait le sillage et nullement la barque  
Parce que le bonheur avait passé par là.**

**Ils s'étaient regardés dans le fond de leurs yeux  
Apercevant enfin la clairière attendue**

**Où couraient de grands cerfs dans toute leur franchise.  
Les chasseurs n'entraient pas dans ce pays sans larmes.**

**Ce fut le lendemain, après une nuit froide,  
Qu'on reconnut en eux des noyés par amour**

**Mais ce que l'on pouvait prendre pour leur douleur  
Nous faisait signe à tous de ne pas croire en elle.**

**Un peu de leur voile errait encore en l'air  
Toute seule, prenant le vent pour son plaisir,**

**Loin de la barque et des rames à la dérive.**

Now try and read it yourself, either individually or in a group.

With a pencil, work on the French text and see how much sense you can make of it.

## II

When translators are working on a poem, they often make a 'trot' – a literal translation – as a way forward. This helps them get the sense of the whole poem. Here is one 'trot' of this particular poem. As it's literal, bits sound very stilted.

### THE RIPPLES

*We saw the ripples, but didn't see the boat (at all), because happiness had passed right through it.*

*They had looked deep into each other's eyes, and at last caught sight of the clearing (glade?) that they had been waiting for...*

*...where big reindeer ran free in all their honesty/ openness. Hunters did not go into that country without tears.*

*It was the following day, after a cold night, that we recognized them as people drowned by (in? for?) love.*

*But what we could take as/ understand was their pain/ grief/ sadness led us all not to believe in it.*

*A little piece of their sail was still floating in the air, all alone, catching the wind for its own pleasure...*

*...far away from the little boat and its oars, which were adrift.*

You might like to study the trot carefully, and by reading the French and the English together build up a picture of what the poet seems to be describing. Think about the mood and tone of the poem, as it will help you when you come to produce your English version.

### III

Now it's time to try to work on a better, more literary translation. The key here is to think that you are trying to produce something that reads as a brilliant poem in English.

The original poem seems to be made of a series of strong images or metaphors. So maybe the best approach is to take the metaphorical passages from the trot and see if you can make them into better English versions.

Here is the first one:

*We saw the ripples, but didn't see the boat (at all), because happiness had passed right through it.*

Any translation has multiple possibilities, especially when we are dealing with poetic language, which can be ambiguous. Here are some different things we could do with this:

- *We saw the ripples, but not the boat, because happiness had passed right through it.*
- *We saw ripples, but could see no boat – happiness had passed through it.*
- *We saw ripples, but no boat. Happiness had wiped it from our view.*
- *There were ripples, but happiness had shrouded the boat in a cloak of invisibility.*
- *We could not see the forest for the trees, for happiness had passed right through it.*

Discuss these versions. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different parts of these versions? Which one do you like best? Or would you prefer some bits of one and some of another? Decide on a 'best' version.

We probably want to keep the ripples and the boat, to fit with the remainder of the poem. There is a sense of an observer (there is definitely a we/ they thing in the poem), so maybe it's wise to keep 'we'?

Now try to come up with a few different suggestions/ versions for these lines:

*They had looked deep into each other's eyes, and at last caught sight of the clearing (glade?) that they had been waiting for... where big reindeer ran free in all their honesty.*

*A little piece of their sail was still floating in the air, all alone, catching the wind for its own pleasure, far away from the little boat and its oars which were adrift.*

Decide which of your versions of these images you like the best.

#### IV

Now you'll have to think about working these images into the shape of a poem. The original has quite a loose structure – unrhyming couplets, with lines of about 12–14 syllables. You might want to imitate either of these elements. Or you might want to use a shape of your own.

Either way, start with your favourite versions of the images and treat your images as part of a 'new' poem that you are creating, with a distinct shape.

**Stephen Walsh**