

## Teachers' notes

### Towards translating 'Le Sillage' by Jules Supervielle

Suggested age group: Years 10–12

The aim of this exercise is to help the students break away from the feeling that when they translate they have to work from the beginning of the poem to the end, translating all of it in order. This poem is made up of a series of imagistic metaphors, so the exercise encourages them to tackle some of those first before shaping their new versions.

This exercise can be done individually but equally in groups or pairs. In the course of the worksheet they will hear and read the poem in French – the assumption is that they will have some French. They will be given a literal translation; and then be encouraged to attempt their own literary versions of the poem by looking at the different possibilities for translations of the metaphors in the poem.

As with all poetry translation it's worth emphasising before the students start that all translation is creative and instead of thinking of what they are doing as a tiresome rendering of the original they should be aiming to produce, above all, a beautiful poem in English.

I

The first stage in translating 'Le Sillage' is for the students to read and hear it in French, and to become familiar with its rhythms, its tone, its stanzaic and rhyming structures. The original text is in the pupil worksheet.

Depending on the ability and age of the set (and how secure their French is) the teacher or the students can read aloud, individually or in chorus. Depending on the class situation the teacher might help at this stage with some of the unfamiliar vocabulary.

The worksheet suggests that, once they have heard the poem, the students themselves might try to read it. Repeated readings in different ways (with sad music in the background, for example) might encourage

them towards a more accurate reading that reflects the tone of the original.

## II

In the next stage of the exercise the students are offered a word-for-word or 'literal' translation – sometimes called a 'trot'. It has none of the rhythm or music of the original, but since it gives an idea of the poem's meaning in plain English, it will be helpful for the students' own poems. The trot can be found on the pupil worksheet.

Students who know a bit of French can check their own translation against the trot.

## III

Now the students can go on to start some translation. Again it is worth emphasising to the students what they are trying to achieve – a beautiful English poem which is a reflection or version of the original, but not necessarily its mirror image.

The worksheet asks the pupils to take three of the poem's metaphorical passages. For the opening couplet the worksheet offers five different versions which they can discuss and analyse for preference. These are just prose translations, but they allow discussion of

- keeping things fairly literal (suggestion 1)
- keeping the literal, but changing the syntax for emphasis (suggestion 2)
- altering some phrases to give a slightly different sense (suggestion 3)
- using phrases familiar from a different context (suggestion 4)
- trying to translate the idiom into an English equivalent (suggestion 5)

If the group is bright, discussion might go beyond which one sounds better and towards one or more of these areas. But don't lose the fun of the exercise by getting bogged down.

The students are then asked to come up with some different versions of two more lines or passages. In a group situation these can be discussed and ranked for preference.

## IV

The final stage of the process is for the students to work their way through the remainder of the poem and to try to come up with a polished, finished version.

At this stage the students need to be encouraged to think about the shape of the new version. They need to be aware that the shape of the English poem may have to 'evolve' and they may get some way down the poem before they settle on the right shape or form. Even if they feel their start is flawed, they can press on and come back to it later.

Each group will need to make some sophisticated decisions. They will need to decide on line-lengths, on whether to imitate the couplet-stanzas, on whether trying to rhyme will help, or hinder. The groups should be encouraged to consider the forms of poetry they know. There is nothing wrong with deciding to turn the poem into a flowing free verse poem, or deciding to use rhyming couplets, or even transforming it into a sonnet.

What matters is that they make creative decisions that in their own view mean they can create something that can capture the true ring of the poem in English, and whether it catches something of the feel, tone and atmosphere of the original.

For me, the key issues lie in getting those metaphors 'right' if that is possible – so they retain their clarity but also their suggestive quality. For this, some tricky footwork is needed. I like the lucid couplets but might think about some gentle pararhyme to echo some of the moments in the poem. Not easy! But the key is for every group, and every translator – including, one hopes, the teacher! – to feel free to go his or her own way.

### **Stephen Walsh**

*The trot for this poem was supplied by Audrey le Goff and Onyinye Udokporo.*