

Translating Pantun into French as a way to maintain 'a Common Voice in a Multicultural World'

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Abstract

Is *Malaysian-ness* translatable ? My concern will be limited to the Francophone scene of reception of Malay/ Malaysian Literature, which has been the object of a long-lasting interest of mine as a Comparatist. Any quantitative survey of the amount and rhythm of translations from Malaysia into France shows that *Pantun* represents a highly privileged « common Voice in a Multicultural World ». I shall not come back, in this presentation, to the well known historical reasons which may be at the root of this particular poetical exchange, among which the pseudo-French invention of *Pantoun*. Rather, since I bear some responsibility in the balance of this French reception of Malaysia, I shall investigate, with the help of my own translation experience, what Umberto Eco has recently proved again: that translation is not a matter of translating a language into another language, nor a text into another text, but a world into another world. But what World, then, signifies the *pantun* for the French, given its apparent importance? Do we translate to learn and teach about the Other, or to comfort Oneself ? I shall re-read my own experience of rendering (or failing to render) *Malayness* into *Frenchness*, but also *Malaysian-ness* into *Francophon-ness*. This extension is based on the theories of Edouard Glissant on creolization and multicultural writing, as they have helped me to try and make a little less *invisible* from the French point of view the principle of '*comparability*' between the Francophone World and what I have called the *Malayophone World* - and make the *pantun*, in my latest publications, approach more clearly than in my previous works the ideal of a poetical *tout-monde*.

*Ambillah, yang halus dan yang harafiah
kerana ini duniamu, seluruhnya*

*Prends ! Prends le subtil et prends le littéral
Car c'est là tout ton monde, d'un bout à l'autre.*

Muhammad Haji Salleh

Let me first express my gratitude to the organizers of this very important Conference, and to those who invited me to participate. I am extremely honoured. To feel lost in the dazzling variety of the world languages and usages may have appeared to a famous American actor as something unpleasant, in the American film alluded to by this Conference title, *Lost in Translation*. Yet, as the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe said, 'Diversity is not an abnormality but the very reality of our planet'¹. The poet and essayist Victor Segalen, a century ago, drew a conclusion that went much further, in his hymn to what he calls the *Diverse*. *Diverse* is to be considered here not as a synonym of diversity, but as a source of essential enjoyment in the human condition, the feeling that one is *fully alive* among all the others. And from the Comparatist view point that is mine, one should finally recall a French pioneer of Comparative Literature of the Romantic age, Philarète Chasle, who had already published our programme by saying that 'nothing lives isolated, the only real isolation is death. Everyone borrows from everyone, this immense travail of sympathy is universal and constant'.

I. Why (re)translate pantuns into French ?

Now, as a modest translator of a Malaysian little thing that I fell in love with ages ago, an absolutely gratuitous love I should say, the Malay pantun, I have tried to follow Victor Segalen's path. It is on this experience that I shall base this communication. Love, indeed, is a very serious business in terms of poetry translation. The French poet and translator Valery Larbaud presents it as one of the very first reasons for the act of translating : 'Now, your friend can read this poem that you like... It is you who will lead him through the visit of this palace (...) What other pleasure can equal this one, to share one's happiness with the people one loves?'² It does not mean that it is an easy path. Otherness is ready to bounce on you from every corner. But for me, coming to the *Diverse* of Malaysia is always *at the same time* a rejoicing and a renewed challenge, and a renewed reward. I would in conclusion defend vigorously this preoccupation that will be my point today: our duty is to leave to our great-grand children the chance to also experience this dual feeling - being at once lost and found in the otherness.

¹ "Bates College Commencement Address", March 27th 1996, quoted in *Autour d'Edouard Glissant* : 24

² *Sous l'invocation de Saint Jérôme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997 (1946) : 37 (« Maintenant, votre ami peut lire ce poème, ce livre que vous aimez (...) C'est vous qui lui faites visiter ce palais... Quel plaisir vaut celui-là, faire partager son bonheur à ceux qu'on aime ? »).

1. In such a perspective, translation occupies a paradoxical position. One translates apparently to make an otherness invisible. For an example, France is the first translating language for literature in the world, and all non-French films on TV are dubbed, so that the supposed ‘national passion’ of the French for their language looks like the inverted symmetry of their interest in learning foreign languages. Victor Segalen had pondered over this paradox, what he calls the ‘entropy of the *Diverse*’. Fortunately, we may consider that the literary language in itself is otherness, and especially poetry, and hence we could envisage a poetic of poetry translation that would itself contribute to reverse this entropy. This is what I have tried lately to do, more deliberately. But can’t we go still further ? Marina Tsvetaieva once wrote to Rainer Maria Rilke : “To write poems, it is already translate from one’s mother tongue into another one, no matter whether it is French, or German. No tongue is a mother tongue. To write poetry is to write *from* (...) A poet can write in French, he cannot be a French poet (...) Or else : one is a poet because one is not French”³. Now, what would be the effect of such a hypothesis on the art of translating pantun ? First of all, this question : but is pantun poetry ? If so, how shall we exalt such a richly endowed poetic form, with its long garland of virtues, its *pantun-ness*, over its *Malayness*, its *Malaysian-ness*, its *Southeast Asian-ness*, its *Asian-ness* - its *gnomic-ness* ?

Tsvetaieva’s poet and translator’s intuition applies to modern poetry, of course. But can’t I envisage that pantun is not *all* poetry, yet does it include in its mystery, *all* of poeticity? Well, many pantuns are just non poetical sayings. But are all poems indeed poetical? This by no way means that one may embark on translating pantuns without any regard for this famous statement by Richard Winstedt, ‘no one can estimate the mental scope of the Malay without an understanding of the pantun, the love verse and lampoon of the Indonesian peoples’⁴. It means that pantuns can *also* be considered first for what they are, what they have to say as islands strewn in the middle of a world archipelago. And this is indeed a wonderful lot. This was my fundamental approach.

2. I read somewhere about the notion of a ‘banian-poetry’, ‘*poésie-baniane*’. This was in connection to the thought of the French West Indian poet and essayist Edouard Glissant. Glissant’s work has nothing whatsoever to do with pantun or Asia, but a few notions that he has promoted all around the francophone scene and beyond its borders offer stimulating interrogations on our own concern. They will help me clarify my pragmatic and emotional experience of translating pantuns within the more theoretical frame of Comparative Literature and Francophone reception. Here are the main notions : 1) the idea of a *Tout-Monde*⁵ ; 2) the presence of and the need to maintain an ‘obscure’ in the contemporary renderings of this *Tout-Monde* ; 3) the poetics of *Relation*, a notion that is at the core of my own attempt as a Comparatist, and what he defines as a way to ‘experience deeply within ourselves the multiplicities, however far they may

³ Quoted from N. Huston, “Trattore non è traditore”, in M. Le Bris, J. Rouaud ed., *Pour une littérature-monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007 : 151.

⁴ « Pantun Melayu », in R. J. Wilkinson, R.O. Winstedt ed., *Pantun Melayu*, Singapore, Malayan Publishing House, 1961 (4th ed) : 183

⁵ “J’appelle Tout-Monde notre univers tel qu’il change et perdure en échangeant et, en même temps, la « vision » que nous en avons », *Traité du Tout-Monde* : 176 (“I call Tout-Monde our universe such as it changes and maintain itself while exchanging and, at the same time, the « vision » we have from it »).

seem to stand away from our particular poetics'⁶; 4) the post-modern utopia of a non-continental, 'archipelique' rewriting of our worlds ; 5) the ever expanding process of a global but anti-universal 'creolization' – expansion that the presence of the pantun on the Web illustrates so well ; 6) the fecund value of unpredictability, a notion borrowed by Glissant from Segalen himself and the Theory of Chaos. Can't such notions help to bring our two archipelagos closer, two archipelagos historically far away from one another, and almost entirely depending on mediations for their mutual understanding ? This has been a part of my interrogations as a Comparatist; interrogations which gave birth to a book entitled, for that matter, *Les Lèvres du monde*, 'The lips of the world'⁷. 'Comparatists', like Julien Gracq write, 'are border breakers, who throw bridges across shores unknown to one another since age, even if sometimes this is more for the sake of the perspective than for traffic' (*Lettrines*, 1967). My latest attempts at translating pantun, beyond the pure and great pleasure that I find in this activity, have also become a way to illustrate these preoccupations.

3. The general background of these preoccupations is easy to figure out: it is a quasi invisibility of the Malay Archipelago literature for the 'ordinary' French reader. This is no little paradox, if one considers that both Malay and French languages belong the very few 'supercentral' languages to gravitate around the single 'hypercentral' English language⁸ ; that Malay/Indonesian is the ninth most spoken language in the world ; and that French, with 20% of all translations devoted to the literary field, is not only the first translation language in the world, but also the first literary translation language, as already mentioned⁹. This is easily verified with the UNESCO *Index Translationum database* (1979-2005), in which eleven Malaysian titles, four novels¹⁰ and six collections of poetry are listed. One collection of short stories has been omitted, so that poetry occupies not less than 50% of this activity. Three titles concern modern and traditional poetry (my own anthologies) and three the pantun, but if we add to these three titles two books that have been dedicated to this genre (one published in English by the DBP and mine) and my two recent new translations, then there are seven books on the Malay pantun in French, while all the rest of the Malaysian production produced in Malaysia seems to be at a standstill. Yet, interest, research and publication about Malaysia have never been really that invisible. A webpage indicates, for 2007, a list of 148 titles concerning Malaysia in French. Only about 30 books are translations (mostly from English), which means that 80% of all that is published in France about Malaysia comes from original research, studies or creativity. But on the other

⁶ « (...) ressentir les multiplicités, si loin qu'elles semblent se tenir de nos poétiques particulières », *La Cohée du Lamentin (Poétique, V)*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005 : 126

⁷ Cf. Voisset, Georges, *Les lèvres du monde. Littératures comparées de la Caraïbe à l'Archipel malais*, (The Lips of the World. Comparative Literature from the Caribbean to the Malay Archipelago)

⁸ The gravitational model of the linguist Louis-Jean Calvet analyzes the "weight" of languages (including the translation criterium) according to their position as hypercentral, supercentral, central or peripheral. Cf. *Traduction et mondialisation*, *Hermès* n° 49, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2007 : 45-57

⁹ According to Louis-Jean Calvet, translations into French include 20% of literary works, compared to 2% for English, *ididem*.

¹⁰ S. Othman Kelantan, *Le vent du Nord-Est* (Angin Timur Laut, 1982) ; Shahnnon Ahmad, *Le Riz* (Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan, 1987) ; Anwar Ridhwan, *L'Autre rive* (Arus, 1989) ; Abdul Samad Said, *Salina* (Salina, 1997).

hand, only 16 of these 148 titles are translations from Malaysian creative works¹¹. The same could be said of the non-negligible creative writing having the Malay Archipelago as a topic or a background, which confirms that the stimulating effects of this imaginary horizon are very alive¹².

But despite such obvious discrepancies, the number of pantun translations still seems too insufficient to draw attention on it, *a fortiori* to make use of it as a marker of a Malaysian literary scene. A quick book-hunting session on the shelves of a few Parisian bookshops will reveal at least seven or eight different translations of haikus, while you will have to show dramatic determination in order to find a single volume of pantuns. This is a great pity. Why? Firstly, because it is the long lasting multiplication and *diversification* of translations, from generation to generation, that makes a masterpiece, A Masterpiece! Translation does not only enrich the target language, as Humboldt noticed : it also enriches the original source. This is an extremely important point, translations keep the source flowing, permanently adding minerals to it. Literary translation not only *saves*, but also *regenerates* the *Diverse*.

The second reason why this state of affairs is a pity is that pantun, at least for me, probably shows the greatest appetite for the *Tout-Monde* that a poetic form can ever embody. Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh's illuminative image demonstrates this extremely beautifully : pantun encompasses 'the desire of the world within four lines', 'Ghairah dunia dalam empat baris' because 'pantun possesses a power to bring human beings together which is really extraordinary'¹³. The core of this extraordinary appetite is its magnificent grasp of its ecological system. But in this rootedness, paradoxically, is its universal value: pantun helps us to inscribe our marks deeply in the world. A pantun, by virtue of its absolute duality between 'concrete' and 'abstract', is *also* deeply rooted in your own *lieu*, any *lieu* in the world, any *earthly* lieu. Hence this useful image of 'banian-poetry'. It is because pantun is so deeply rooted in our common soil and Earth, that it is so magnificently *commonplace*. By using this adjective *commonplace*, I refer to another Glissantian notion, which plays with the French expression a '*lieu commun*', which is the French equivalent for a '*topos*'. Walter Benjamin once imagined a language of things, prior to the languages of the humans¹⁴. I imagine myself that this might be one reason why pantun is unique : it is the voice of the Earth, as well as that of Mankind and that of a certain Wisdom.

4. And now, we come to this extremely beautiful Malay image that can be found in the precious Universiti Sains Malaysia website dedicated to pantun : '*Jatuh ke laut, menjadi pulau*', 'If thrown into the sea, it becomes an island'. It is the second part of a Malay proverb used by Dr Muhammad Salleh Yaapar to expound the family relationship between the original Malay *pantun* and its cosmopolitan cousin called *pantoum*, with the French spelling [ou] and an [m] at the end. The full Malay proverb could be translated

¹¹ The figure includes comics. Cf. Serge Jardin, « Livres en français sur la Malaisie », La Maison de l'Escargot, Malacca, April 2007, laclaquetteverte.files.wordpress.com/2009/livres-sur-la-malaisie-sjardin4.pdf

¹² See my brief survey in the volume dedicated to translation between France and Indonesia in the Review *Le Banian*, n° 9 : *Traduction et Interprétation. Vices et vertus de la loyauté et de la fidélité*, Paris, Franco-Indonesian Association, Dec. 2009

¹³ « Ghairah dunia dalam empat baris : pantun sebagai bentuk bersama », www.usm.my/pantun/ (« Pantun mempunyai penyertaan khalayak yang amat luar biasa. Semua ini menunjukkan dinamisme bentuk ajaib ini - yang membenarkan pembaruan, membesarkan, penciptaan kembali, rujukan kepada pantun lain... »)

¹⁴ Cf. C. Bracken, « The Language of Things : Walter Benjamin's Primitive Thought », *Semiotica* 138, 2002.

thus, 'A good seed - thrown it into the sea, will become an island'. The native flavour of this powerful simile plunges us into the heart of the archipelagic metaphor of multilateral and unpredictable creative exchanges. It is marvellously Malay, and 'archipélique', all at once, as the pantoum can indeed be considered as a perfect illustration of the theory of the fruitful unpredictability in poetic exchanges and creativity. An irrelevant spelling mistake in 1829 Victor Hugo's manuscript engendered what Dr Salleh Yaapar justly calls a 'generic recreation', is eventually becoming, thanks to Internet, an incredible source of confusion, but as well, an exceptional source of multilateral creativity.

I will not recall here the well-known history of the French misunderstanding called pantoum. Sufficient to say that for our purpose that the growing international success of pantoum has not helped the reception of the genuine pantun in francophonie, but has been, quite on the opposite, a formidable blinker. The French translator can hardly pretend to ignore this fact, which will interfere with the reception of any publication concerning pantun. And this confusing horizon is all the more pregnant as there is no poetic tradition, in France, which could be compared to the original quatrain, such as the Russian *chastushka* for an example. Comparative poetics has lengthily looked into these matters among European scholars, but in France one was obviously looking elsewhere. There exists yet another entrance to the Malay genre in France : Henri Fauconnier's novel entitled *Malaisie*, Goncourt Prize in 1930. Although this book only gave five complete pantuns, with only two translations, the love for the Malay way of life that Fauconnier demonstrated, and the exceptional quality of this novel for a colonial novel, became the precious French antidote to the French poison, 'racun diminum jadi penawar' - 'the poison drunk becomes the antidote', as a delicious pantun says. But in the end, this only contributed to a more radical division of the reception. Two volumes were published at about the same time (1988 and 2000) by the same publisher in the same collection, to make this clear, one of Malay pantuns and one of international pantoums¹⁵. But one decade later, last March, when my third volume of pantuns came out under the title *Le Chant à quatre mains. Pantoums et autres poèmes d'amour (The Four-Hand Singing. Pantuns and other love poems)*, a major cyber site devoted to poetry immediately advertised it under the subtitle *Pantoums and other love poems*. The same thing had happened fifteen years ago when several translations of my first collection circulated in the Paris Underground, on the occasion of a poetry reading campaign.

Should one sit and cry, like in this Penang pantun - 'I sit, and tears run from my eyes'? It would certainly not be an 'archipélique' attitude to give an answer. What is sure is that confusion is growing on the Web. I made a quick survey on the proportion of PANTUN and PANTOUM pages on the Net, according to a few different languages. There is a lot to learn from the results, but only two simple conclusions will illustrate my purpose today : in English, the total occurrences for PANTOUM represents 46% of the occurrences for PANTUN, while they are only 12% world-wide. This means that the confusion is likely to expand. But at the same time, as occurrences for PANTOUM make for 88% of all entries in French, which represents an exception, this very growing confusion can only enlighten the French reception of the genuine

¹⁵ Cf. J. Jouet, *Echelle et Papillons : le Pantoum*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1998, and F.R. Daillie, *La lune et les étoiles. Le Pantoun malais. Récit – essai – anthologie*, 2000.

Malay genre. I shall conclude this paper with a few illustrations proving that the trend, indeed, maybe slightly inverted.

This is quite a new phenomenon, and this is a phenomenon that I also tried to take into account in my recent book, which constitutes a much more complete, complex and elaborate attempt than the previous books. This mirrors my personal evolution, as well as this bubbling, disorganised, unpredictable, ‘*creolizing*’ expansion of the genre since the 1990s - notably in Malaysia, where a new generation is rediscovering its treasures, as shown by the young novelist Sri Rahayu Mohd Yusop’s novel entitled *Warisnya Kalbu*¹⁶. Let’s look rapidly at Internet : we find scholars like Victor Pogadaev, who quote indifferently pantoums and pantuns under the sole generic term of pantuns¹⁷. And we find this young Indonesian couple who drop their ‘Love in a Hundred pantoum’ on their blog, while announcing in the same sentence their intention to publish a book entitled *Cinta dalam Seratus Pantun* (‘Love in a Hundred pantuns’)¹⁸ later. They remind me of Edouard Glissant’s words, ‘Start from the Beyond and then move upstream to Here, where your own spring and your own house do open up’¹⁹, while another quote from the same will illustrate more theoretically our problematic : ‘Nowadays, we write in the presence of all the languages of the world’. Couldn’t we, once more, transfer this principle, and say : “Nowadays, we translate in the presence of all the languages of the world” ? This is what I have tried to take into account in this latest collection of mine, and it will be the subject of the second part of this communication.

II. How to (re)translate pantuns ?

1. How to instil the *Diverse* in pantun translation, to enhance the pantun’s presence in the *Tout-Monde*, while betraying its geniality, its world-friendliness, its originality as little as possible ? How to translate both in depth and in extension ? I can give only a few examples of how I tried to illustrate this principle, with some comments. First of all, there is what pertains to the organization of the book as a non-systematic multiplicity of relations, and not a systematized catalogue : use of graphic disposition devices on the page, to compensate the loss of orality on the other hand, exemplification of some typical aspects of orality, that I cannot detail here ; side translations in a dozen of languages ; relations with different poetic forms more or less akin or simply comparable ; thematic or metaphorical echoes among world poetry ; modern pantuns by Malaysian and Indonesian poets. All this is being displayed around the translations themselves, so as to present the pantun as the central flower of a bunch, to respect the appetite of the genre for the world. Nothing at all resembling a *Rafflesia* expedition, then. I shall not insist here of the obvious *Malaysian-ness* of the Malay pantun, the essential contribution of the Baba Nyonya creative context as

¹⁶ Cf. the site relung-cahaya.blogdrive.com/archive/32.html

¹⁷ “Pantun Melayu ala Rusia”, *Seminar Pantun Melayu*, 6-7 december 2007, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, on eprints.um.edu.my/78

¹⁸ “*Love in A Hundred Pantoum*. INI proyek seratus pantun cinta Hasan Aspahani dan Dedy Tri Riyadi. Kelak bila dibukukan judulnya : Cinta dalam Seratus Pantun.”, 100lovepantoum.blogspot.com/2007/03/pantoum-vii.html

¹⁹ “Partez de l’Ailleurs et remontez ici, où s’ouvrent votre maison et votre source”, *Traité du Tout-Monde* : 115

shown by Professor Ding Choo Ming's studies²⁰. With Persian, Chinese, Arabic, Sanscrit, Tamil, Mah Meri, Kristang, Dutch, English horizons intertwined in this very *Malaysian-ness* of *pantun-ness*, would not the translator be sufficiently aware that he has touched the magic button leading to an unfathomable poetical universe ?

But how to account for the subconscious rich imagery all those princes from Egypt, Turkey, Jeddah, Rum (Constantinople) who stroll into pantun, those princesses of Java, those 'Keling' Indian girls whose name, for me, twinkle and tinkle like their bangles ? My partition extends as far as Madagascar and Zanzibar, but this is no pure fancy of mine. Is not the imaginary afro-arabo-malayo-persian country called Janggi, with its fabulous "*sherbet Janggi*", a sort of ultimate poetical horizon for our pantun - "*Tujuh tahun, manis ta' hilang*", "Just taste it, and seven years later its sweetness will still rejoice you" ?

2. Secondly, let's come then to the language of translation itself. Could this language of translation be as different from French as that of Tsvetaieva is to Russian ? Glissant suggests it, though not being the least a translator himself : 'The translator invents a language, a language which is necessary from one tongue to the other, in the same way as the poet invents a language in his own tongue, a language common to both, but sort of unpredictable in relation to each of them'²¹. Actually, do I invent or simply imagine a language *above* Malay and French when I translate a pantun which I like and selected? In a way, thinking of it, yes. A language of simplicity, full of the silence of surrender to the evidences of this world, the basic evidence of "proverbility" for example ; but at the same time, full of the awareness that this evidence is poetry made into a snare for me to fall into. And I shall fall into the snare from the moment my pantun becomes something twisted, artificial. Which does not mean, of course, that translations cannot not be highly literary when necessary, and I do practice the highly formal renderings as well – *among others*.

Pantun owes this simplicity partly to the fact that it concentrates one single 'load' of poeticity. It is enough to translate a poem by Firdaus Abdullah entitled 'Pantun di Moskow' to understand that even in such a beautifully close imitation of the genuine genre, the images overflow one onto another. To attain this simplicity, without any twisting of the language, is extremely difficult, and for a translator, it is where the utmost challenge lies. There lies the ideal, unattainable, language of pantun translation. I do not use the word ideal innocently. Walter Benjamin, in his seminal essay on translating poetry, refers to the 'pure language'. Antoine Berman interprets Benjamin's 'pure language' as what, 'inside the work, is pure orality beyond the written'²². I wonder if it would make sense to consider that pantun's extreme simplicity, unicity, is a kind of "pure orality beyond orality". One could investigate in this direction when noting that the Malay pantun is at the same time immersed in orality and in a highly written civilization. This would open new connections, of course, with the transformation of pantoun into pantoum, among others.

3. Third point : there is, at the heart of the image machinery, an opacity which should be maintained. Obscurity is congenial to the genre, the famous "veiled beauty" mentioned by Richard Wilkinson. It goes almost without saying, as for this blogger : 'It will sound a little bit weird since it is supposed to be a

²⁰ Cf. "The Malaysian Baba Pantun Database", melayuonline.com/.../the-malaysian-baba-pantun-database

²¹ *Introduction à une poétique du Divers* : 45.

²² Cf. *L'Age de la traduction. « La tâche du traducteur » de Walter Benjamin, un commentaire*, Vincennes, Vincennes University Press, 2008 : 27.

pantun'²³. Yet it is well known that most pantuns are not particularly complicated to grasp nor their imagery to be transferred, as Katharine Sim and Krishnavanie Shunmungan have rightly shown²⁴. So, where does this obscurity come from? It proceeds from the obscurity pertaining to poetry itself, but then is exploited as a sort of un-interrupted thread, from the core of the quatrain to the whole wide world. This obscure something is, according to me, something to be maintained, enhanced by the translator, a precious principle of the Relation 'which is not just the impact or the contact, but, further away, the implication of opacities saved and integrated'²⁵. Here is a small example with a beautiful pantun in which eternal love is compared to a shroud, '*Tuan seumpama kain kapan*', literally 'My love is similar to a shroud'. Nothing can be less poetical and more repelling when transferred into the French cultural world. My previous publisher had advised me to cancel it. But I considered that there was a forceful 'load' of poeticity, of meditation over the Beyond, to be conveyed through this pantun, and the intercultural misunderstanding of hidden or non-hidden or semi-hidden images only proved this even more than its necessity. My French rendering, '*Mon aimé est pareil au linceul*', through its rhythm and sounds, at least tries to maintain harmony over disruption, beauty over the hideous, enjoyable *Diverse* over excluding fears.

4. Another important consideration, partly resulting from the previous ones, is the refusal to translate all the pantuns with the same systematic principles. Each pantun is a fully accomplished world and poem in itself. The application of a systematic rule, for an example the rhyming principle, does not have then to apply. But above all, the ultimate characteristic of pantun is that it includes the maximum of rules within the minimum of words. This is of course the price to pay for its unique beauty : the more successful it is, the less these constraints are felt as obligations. Again, I shall not decide what is good and what is bad. Poeticity and beauty have never shown much interest to obligations. What is sure is that there is no chance for a translator, ever, to maintain all the rules of the best pantuns, whereas often, a pantun is beautiful thanks to only one, or two, or three of these rules. In that respect, there is not much difference between the translator and the creator of a poem that would be embodied in the shape of a pantun, whether he is Malay or not, Malaysian or not. Out of a certain amount of rules, the mysterious and beautiful opacity of the language beyond has to manifest itself – or not. To conclude on this point, I think that translation should therefore strive to make itself invisible, give priority to the rules which can save the simplicity of this mystery, and forget about the others. My translations were not simply the result of a pragmatic confrontation with a poem, a confrontation renewed at each encounter, but also the result of this principle, which is coherent with the principle of transferring in the book, as far as possible, the maximum diversity that only the original pantun can give in its full flavour.

5. And now comes a fifth and last point which could be summarized, paradoxically, as the exact opposite of a previous principle : translation should be made conspicuous. Whatever is not to be "saved"

²³ « (...)Translation of the poem (it'll sound a little bit weird since it is supposed to be a 'pantun' (poem))", Learn Malay - AsianFanatics Forum, asianfanatics.net/forum/topic/117600-learn, april 2007.

²⁴ « The Translation of Metaphors in Malay Pantuns into English », Monash University Conference paper, 2007, research.nla.gov.au/main/results?subject=Pantun

²⁵ *L'Intention poétique (Poétique II)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969 : 22 : (« (...) la Relation, qui n'est pas tout court l'impact, ni le contact, mais plus loin l'implication d'opacités sauvées et intégrées »

from the obscure in the transfer is to be made obvious. It could be in a way – but in a way only – the place for the ethical part of the translating act. There are many ways to achieve this aim. For an example, since the Malay word *abang*, elder brother, my lover, you or me, cannot be rendered, why not propose a few possibilities on a page ? Baudelaire has a famous love poem starting with ‘*Mon enfant, ma soeur*’ (‘My child, my sister...’). Is it forbidden to create a relation to Baudelaire, when the language itself says so ? Another example : Senghor, the African poet, insists that in poetry, even the image is a product of the rhythm : ‘It is from rhythm we must proceed, which produces not only the melody but also the image, through its interactive, and consequently suggestive, creative surge’²⁶. In one case, I have tried to enhance the central value of the image through rhythm, and this finally has led to... a prose-poetry translation, something Glissant calls (in French of course) ‘*poésie*’.

A last example, from the following pantun : ‘*Sayang saya berkasih jauh / Petang-petang hancur hati*’ (‘Alas my love is far away / Tonight my heart will break into pieces’). There is a certain French expression, ‘*amour lointain*’ (‘far away love’), which somehow translates better than others the dynamics of the Malay verbal structure *berkasih jauh*, a structure without equivalent in our European idioms. This ‘*amour lointain*’ has yet a precise connotation in France : it refers to the poetics of the medieval southern France roaming love-singers called the Troubadours. You may think it is awful to possibly give such a literary remote connotation to the translation, while what we are talking about is a peasant girl who loves a boy from a different kampong. Yet, there is no trespassing of the rule of the ‘super’ simple language in the use of this very simple French expression. It is the simplest expression to translate the Malay wording. Yet, the ‘super’ common language is perfectly at work. I imagine a Malay reader of the translation, who will enrich the original source poem while imagining all kinds of travelling *dagang*, *pengembara* and *kelana* from the Archipelago.

It is time to conclude, and I shall do so with the reading of three contemporary pantouns in French. Here is the first one :

Sous le banyan rêve l'enfant :
Bateau de sève, barreaux de vent.
Sous le drapeau crèvent les gens :
*Rectangle blanc, barreaux de sang*²⁷

(Under the banyan tree dreams the child
 Boat from its sap, bars made from wind
 Under the flag the peoples die
 White rectangles, but bars of blood)

The second poem is a product of a creative writing exercise proposed on a poetry cyber site, apparently after one of my translations. It consists in ‘translating’ this pantun with strictly no knowledge of the Malay language. Here are the first two lines of the original :

²⁶ « Et d’abord, du *rythme*. C’est de lui qu’il faut partir, qui engendre non seulement la mélodie, mais aussi l’image par son élan itératif et, partant, suggestif, créatif », « Dialogue sur la poésie francophone », *Oeuvre poétique*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1990 : 394 (1964).

²⁷ Marie-Catherine Daniel, antrelire.over-blog.com/categorie-10389848.html, Dec. 18, 2009

*Banyak orang bergelang tangan
Sahaya seorang bergelang kaki*,

and here is the sound transfer into French, which bears strictly no meaning connection to the original :

*Baignant dans la fange du fleuve alangui
Tu savoures, mon ange, de la langue, kakis (..)*'.

Surely, the poetical value of these two quatrains is not something which is unforgettable. But beyond the mere fact that at least they now exist, one cannot not to be stricken by the common sound [ang] common to both of them. But even more astonishing is the fact that we are in front of the 'Big Bang' at the origin of the French pantoum. The famous linked pantun which served as a model, extracted from William Marsden's *Grammar*, actually begins like this : '*Kupu-kupu terbang melintang / terbang di laut di hujung karang*', etc. For ages, I have experienced myself the *awakening* power and value of a Malay poetics of 'bunyi' ('sound, rhyme') - hence the title of my UNESCO anthology of traditional poetry, '*Sounds to Soothe Care*'. An uncommon French poet had already expressed this sensitivity in a long poem written in 1902, entitled '*Le pantoun des pantoun*' ('The Pantun of Pantun'). His attempt was based on the romantic aspiration for an adamic language, and deliberately mingles the sounds of Malay amidst French. It is a pity that the pro-pantun party, in France, has decided that such a remarkable and pioneer hetero-linguistic experiment was nothing but 'a pretentious unreadable rhapsody which is not even worth quoting'²⁸. I feel exactly the opposite. If one translates '*perkukut*' by '*dove*', there is no doubt that the linguist is right ; but translate it by '*tourterelle*', and Ghil triumphs. This could be even used as a homeopathic medicine against the worse aspects of a '*rojak globalization*'²⁹.

As for the third and last French pantun that I will quote now, it will serve as my conclusion. An approximate translation into English would say :

Never did a mountain claim for the moon
The blueberry shrubs drink the stars
You are the un-reclaimable happiness
To pluck the night one should climb in the dark

You are allowed to hear in these lines a homage to the famous Malay pantun The Moon and the Stars, '*Kalau tidak kerana bintang*' (If not for the stars...). And it is certainly also, from my part, a homage to *Malaysian-ness*. But as I was typing this conclusion, another deep statement by Walter Benjamin came to my mind, about the 'compulsion to translate': 'Between the space of the principle and the act of translating, there exists an obscure space for choice where the subjectivity and the unconscious interfere'. Honestly, if you ask me why and how I am so deeply satisfied and yet always unsatisfied with translating pantun, I don't know. It is just a matter of plucking the night, probably.

Thank you.

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²⁸ F.R. Daillie, *Alam Pantun Melayu: Studies on the Malay Pantun* : 34.

²⁹ For an analysis of this unique experience of Franco-Malay *métissage*, see my study "Cratyle métis. Les harmonies franco-javanaises de René Ghil", in *Les Lèvres du monde, op. cit.* : 243-259

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Table 1 :
Relative use of PANTOUM to PANTUN in a few languages*

	PANTUN	PANTOUM	% PANTOUM / PANTUN
<i>All languages</i>	1 000 000	119 000	12 %
Indonesian	660 000	350	0,05%
Turkish	7 740	111	1,4%
Russian	2 260	203	9%
Tagalog	3 000	300	10%
Chinese	3 000	340	11%
Dutch	3160	418	12%
Spanish	4 940	713	14%
Arabic	1 010	154	15%
Thai	1 320	241	18%
German	5 730	1 120	20%
Vietnamese	1 030	310	30%
English	236 000	110 000	46 %
French	3 520	11 500	326%

Table 2 :
Relative interference of the spellings PANTOUN and PANTOEN with PANTUN

French	PANTOUN	PANTUN/PANTOUN	PANTOUM/PANTOUN
	13 000	27%	88%
English	6 500	2,7%	6%
Dutch	PANTOEN	PANTUN/.PANTOEN	PANTOUM/PANTOEN
	5 000	63%	8%

*Google, 02/07/2010