

always opens with the story of Chronos and Logos; the reader cannot access the island screen without first entering the screen featuring parables and videos, making the eventual discovery of the island sequences seem like the preordained end of the reading process. Every time a reader accesses a text or video, it appears on the screen in a running list, like a browsing history (unless she chooses to clear the history). There is a strong temptation to read such a list chronologically from left to right or top to bottom—to think of the entire story, despite all the choices involved in moving from one screen to the next, as having a clear beginning, middle, and end. Despite the designer’s intention to immerse readers in limitless possibilities, the program, like the folk tale tradition to which it belongs, runs in the repetitive circuits of Fate.

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Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, *The Complete Late Poetry of Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo*. Translated by Leonard Fox. Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010. 440pp. \$129.95

Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, Africa’s first Modernist poet, was born in 1901 at the cusp of Madagascar’s colonization by France, and ended his own life by cyanide in 1937, a decade before its first heaves into independence. His relationship to the artistic tradition of his colonizers was nonreciprocal, and he remained an unheard interlocutor with the French avant-garde for the first decade of his career. His poetic inspirations were passé—the same year Rabearivelo published his first collection of neo-Romantic verse in French, *La coupe de cendres* (The bowl of ashes, 1924), Andre Breton published the Surrealist Manifesto, and the Paris art world was toasting the poet members of its Cubist circles, Pierre Reverdy and Blaise Cendrars. Rabearivelo’s Madagascar-based publisher was French, but didn’t have avant-garde sensibilities; its catalogue included titles on guano harvesting and local folk dress. And there was the inevitable issue of cultural difference. When Rabearivelo broke free of his Romantic influences with the important essay “Quelques poètes, enfants d’Orphée,” Henri Michaux was visiting India and Southeast Asia and writing about his experiences as “a barbarian in Asia.” The exchange with global French culture was at cross currents.

Rabearivelo’s early reputation was never in doubt in his own country, however. As the editor of Malagasy poetry anthologies and renowned local literary journals *18 Latitude Sud* and *Capricorne*, Rabearivelo was the de facto Madagascar laureate. He was an advocate as well as a poet: he spoke for himself and on behalf of an entire Malagasy tradition to his French counterparts. He translated his own writing in Malagasy and that of others into

French, an important attempt to establish legitimacy in the language of his poetic influences and political colonizers. Such attempts were not uncommon, and always fraught with political implications. Frantz Fanon writes of the same problem faced by Caribbean natives in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952): “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter...in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language.” Rabearivelo’s poetry and criticism in French bears the imprint of this identity conflict, even on the level of its formal innovations. His final book, *Vieilles chansons des pays d’Imerina* (*Old Songs from Imerina Lands*, 1939), adapts the traditional Malagasy verse form *hainteny*, an oral form that he had written about in critical articles and anthologies, into short lyric poems in French. Prosodically, the *hainteny* is organized into sets of distichs defined by metrical lengths of three or four accents and assnant clusters. Thematically it is a gnomic wisdom poetry that often takes the tone of a proverb. (See Leonard Fox’s history of the form in *Hainteny: The Traditional Poetry of Madagascar* [Bucknell University Press, 1990].) Rabearivelo’s adaptations stretch its structure by French prosody (where syllable count rather than accent matters), and also by his invocation of the traditional French *chanson*:

- Là à l’ouest, il ya a un arbre qui a de petites et jolies feuilles.
- Ce n’est pas l’arbre qui a de petites et jolies feuilles, mais c’est nous, ici, qui avons un joli petit amour.

- There, to the west, is a tree that has little pretty leaves.
- It is not the tree that has little pretty leaves, but it is we, here, who have a pretty little love.

This poem lacks the rhyme we associate with the *mélodie* lyrics of Gautier and du Masset, but it mirrors the rhetorical structure, with the turn at the end of the stanza built on a simple hendiadys figure to offer generalization from nuances of observation. The first line has “petites et jolies feuilles” (literally, “little and pretty leaves”), with adjectives split to emphasize, not a description of the size or shape of the leaves, but rather their exquisiteness. The simile is disarmingly simple, marked by the contrast of “there” and “here,” and the form is inclusive: the beloved is not an object but a subject joined with the lover in appreciation of their mutual affection. This poem reveals the structural affinity that the French and Malagasy poetic traditions share.

But Rabearivelo’s work is more than just Modernism refracted back from the colonies. Leonard Fox’s work is significant in that he is the first to publish the original Malagasy versions for an English-language readership, and then translate Rabearivelo from his native tongue instead of from the poet’s French self-translations. As a Western audience, we might tend to use familiarity with the French tradition as leverage into these poems from an

unknown language. But this volume allows us for the first time to reverse this circuit, to think of the French poetic technique as exotic to the vocabulary and diction of a native Malagasy speaker. Rabearivelo's poetry is built from images of Madagascar's folklore, flora, and fauna. The short lyrics published in the book's sections titled *Saify-Noky (Almost-Dreams)* and *Nadika Tamin' Ny Alina (Translated from the Night)* are brimming with the commonplace images and scenes of life on the African island. "Harivan-Dririnina" ("Winter Evenings") concludes with an apostrophe to Rabearivelo's hometown, the capital city Antananarivo, at the moment "on the threshold of winter evenings / that you are especially yourself":

You are nothing but dream, nothing but melancholy,
o tomb of verdure
erected like a mausoleum
surrounded by vines
parted by the four winds racing
in pursuit of their boars
that bellow near my door.

The images speed one after another, line by line, and that unraveling clause pushes us to the very earthly and instinctive cry of the animals in the final line. Yet the natural order, more classical than surrealist, depicted in this world is most fascinating: the straying boars belong to the winds, who both are and are not personified as the speaker's equals; in any case, their boars are loose and bothering the neighbors. It is no wonder that the imagery is more compelling than the prosody; the translation's tone has something clinical about it. Whether or not "verdure" is the accurate term linguistically speaking, it is a flat term poetically speaking. But that neutrality of diction can also be seen as a gift. The appeal of a translation by a lexicographer rather than a poet is that we are given only semantic assistance and must imagine our way into an original we cannot understand as a whole; we must think poetically into the poem, and return to hear the original lines after getting their meaning down first: *Nofinofy fotsiny hianae eo, alahelohelo fotsiny / ry fasana hazo.*

Rabearivelo is not just Africa's first and greatest Modernist poet; his writing is one of the great regional voices of Modernism. Madagascar's island character is essential to this poetic vision. Like a fellow Modernist poet of the coast, Eugenio Montale (with his beloved Liguria), Rabearivelo fixes his poetic gaze at the transitional landscape and the strange fauna that calls it home:

Ebbing of the ocean light.
Cuttlefish, retreating,
blacken the sand
with their thick slime;
but a great many little fish

that resemble silver seashells,
unable to escape,
flounder there:
they are taken in the nets
cast by shadowy algae
that become lianas
and spread over the cliff of the sky.

The players in this grim, natural conspiracy scene consist of local wildlife, much of which is endemic to the island ecosystem: *trondro* is the Malagasy word for “fish,” seen in the fifth line, but refers specifically, according to the 1973 *Diksonera Malagasy-Englisy* edited by Fredrick Stang Hollander, to “a goldfish acclimated in Madagascar.” Here, the poem reveals a poetic truth that the dictionary muddles: they may be like goldfish, but their colors in the moonlight are silver, striking against the black cuttlefish ink. The “liana” of the penultimate line is the Malagasy *vahy*, a term that means simply “vine”—but a tropical vine, a ground vine that forms a canopy by climbing and feeding parasitically from trees. (It is tempting to read “colonization” into this parasitic relationship—the violence against the floundering fish is certainly one sign of struggle.) In these choices, Fox reveals his intimate knowledge of Malagasy usage: he has chosen a specific rather than general term to mark the limited semantic range that *vahy* has in a limited geographical area and language community. This choice also underscores the role that a speaker’s particular place and voice always has in lyric. Critical theorists have reduced Rabearivelo to his role in the Négritude movement in postcolonial writing (including Césaire, Senghor, Fodeba, and others), one assertion of his value as a writer. But this translation does more: it is the first step in recognizing the peerless individual voice of one of the great unknown Modernist poets.

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