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A Lyrical Comparison of “Suzanne” and Its Translation

While translation is commonly used for “traditional” texts, like literature, or for “practical” measures like translation of medical practices, it can also be used for entertainment purposes, such as music. Translating lyrical works can be difficult, because as the Argentine writer and translator Luis Borges said, “poetry presupposes an intensity that is not tolerated in prose” (Borges 97). In 1997, the translator Graeme Allwright, a French immigrant from New Zealand, translated *Suzanne* by Canadian singer and poet, Leonard Cohen, into French. This paper will analyze Allwright’s approach, comparing it to well-known theories like the translation theorist Antoine Berman’s “twelve deforming tendencies of translation” that “deviate a translation from its essential aim” (Berman 242) and literary critic George Steiner’s “Hermeneutic Motion,” defined as the “appropriative transfer of meaning” (Steiner 156). Additionally, this paper will investigate the patriarchal implications of both versions of *Suzanne*.

Allwright translated *Suzanne* during the mid-1960’s debate about whether France should emphasize its French rock-and-roll songs or international music (namely music in English); this conflict was known as the *yéyés* (those who resisted the influence of Anglo-American music) versus international music magazines like *Rock et Folk* (Mus 239). When a hegemonic language (such as English) is in competition with a less hegemonic language, even if the minority language (here, French) is also a country’s national language, minority language speakers can become defensive and protective of their native language. Even though French is considered a majority language with an important colonial and post-colonial history, its influence in the entertainment industry is significantly weaker than that of English.

As the popularity of English-language songs (by foundational rock groups such as The Beatles) in France increased, French listeners could choose between “the classic idiom of cultural nationalism,” exclusively and doggedly relying on French music, or expand their horizons and listen to foreign music (Cronin 137). Allwright compromised in this debate and brought a popular English song to France. He catered to his French audience by translating this song into their language so they could enjoy Cohen’s thought-provoking sentiments and musical ability in *Suzanne*, but also stay within the comfortable safety of cultural nationalism.

Allwright’s stated goal in translating Cohen’s works was “to respect as much as possible the thought of Leonard Cohen, which I appreciate a lot. I hope that my work will help French listeners to better understand and penetrate Cohen’s sometimes difficult universe” (Mus 241).

This quote indicates that Allwright tried to follow the so-called instrumental model of translation, as he aimed to reproduce Cohen’s thoughts over creating his own interpretation.

However, despite this reliance on the instrumental model, which aims to find equivalence and reproduce universals between translations, Allwright’s translation unintentionally deformed some of the simple, basic features of Cohen’s song.

To understand the choices Allwright made, it is helpful to compare his translated lyrics to Cohen’s original ones. Generally, the first stanza of the French, translated *Suzanne* stays true to the original’s meaning. However, Allwright added and subtracted some words that alter the meaning of the song. For example, the first two lines of the original start simply: “Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river// You can hear the boats go by, you can spend the night forever.” These lines don’t indicate anything special – only that the speaker has a love interest in Suzanne, who -- claiming independent agency as the female grammatical subject of the sentence

“Suzanne takes you down” -- has her own place and, in an arrangement between equals, allows the male narrator to spend the night there as long as they both so desire.

. When Allwright translates these lines, though, he changes them to « Suzanne t'emmène écouter les sirènes//Elle te prend par la main// Pour passer une nuit sans fin. » Instead of using common, rather neutral words like “place by the river” or “boat,” Allwright changes these signifiers to “Suzanne takes you to listen to the sirens” and “she takes you by the hand.”

According to Berman’s deforming tendency of ennoblement, when signifiers are changed to make “‘elegant’ sentences,” this change occurs at the “expense of the original” (Berman 246).

By changing the lyrics from boats to sirens, Allwright gives the song takes on a more seductive feeling. The original text comes across as a typical love song, but with these opening lines in Allwright’s version, the listener quickly knows that Suzanne is a dangerous woman who will be luring the speaker, possibly to his death (“une nuit sans fin,” or “a night without end). “Siren” has connotations of a seductive but dangerous woman, who holds power over the male narrator. Like a siren luring a sailor into the deep, she takes the speaker by the hand for him to spend a night without end.

French speakers will interpret this sexist implication by way of the Gricean method. Translator and cultural theorist Kwame Appiah defines this concept, developed by Herbert Grice, as “the act that achieves its purpose because its purpose is recognized” (Appiah 333). The purpose here is recognizing the conventional, patriarchal meaning that the female character is sensual and alluring, but that she also possesses power and agency and should be feared by men. The listeners will make this assumption based on the connotation of the word siren, even though Allwright does not literally *say* that Suzanne is a powerful seductress. This important signifier gives a new meaning to the translated song and more overt patriarchal overtones.

Neither version of *Suzanne* is unproblematic in this respect. Cohen's "Suzanne" as well has patriarchal overtones, but in the opposite direction. In the second stanza, Cohen says "And you want to travel with her// And you want to travel blind// And you know that she will trust you// For you've touched her perfect body with your mind." While Allwright's version gives Suzanne the agency of a dangerous seductress, Cohen's version places all the power in the man's hands. Suzanne is expected to trust the speaker and follow him wherever he may go, because the speaker has touched her female body with his "superior" male intellect. Allwright's second stanza "You want to stay by her side // now you're not afraid // to travel with closed eyes // a passion burns in your heart." (« Tu veux rester à ses côtés// Maintenant tu n'as plus peur// De voyager les yeux fermés// Une flamme brûle dans ton cœur ») displays the opposite, as the speaker yearns to accompany Suzanne wherever blindly she travels. Perhaps this reversal of roles shows the differences of gender expectations in American and French culture. Lyrical texts are not meant to only entertain an audience; as Appiah points out, they also "exist as linguistic, as historical, as political events," and each version of *Suzanne* gives the audience "different opportunities between [they] must choose" (Appiah 340). Listeners have the opportunity to interpret these signifiers as clues for deeper meanings, based on divergent gender roles that nevertheless both produce a negative view of women.

Another key deforming tendency that damages Allwright's translation is his omission of the locations and specifically North American cultural references. As a result, Allwright's translation is a of qualitative impoverishment, which Berman explains as "the replacement of terms, expressions and figures in the original with terms, expressions and figures that lack their sonorous richness or, correspondingly, their signifying or "iconic" richness." In his fifth stanza, Cohen makes a pun on the Salvation Army "She's wearing rags and feathers from Salvation

Army counters.” In the following line, he says “And the sun pours down like honey on our lady of the harbor.” Canadian French speakers might interpret the “lady of the harbor” as a reference to the statue of the Virgin atop the mariners’ church of Notre Dame de Bon Secours in Montreal’s old district (O’Neil 93). These references carry connotations of poverty (since the Salvation Army is primarily geared towards homeless people), but also hope, since the Virgin statue “looks out to sea and, in imitation of Christ’s gesture to Peter, extends an outstretched hand to bless the departing sailors” (O’Neil 93). However, Allwright’s translation merely repeats the chorus in the fifth stanza, where these important references should be. He replaces the Virgin statue with Notre Dame, which European French speakers will likely associate with the Notre Dame de Paris cathedral. Notre Dame de Paris symbolizes peace and concordance, which perhaps to the peace that Suzanne gives to the speaker. This “monument swap” damages Cohen’s choice of signifiers and his metaphor, but it is an essential impoverishment that Allwright had to make. French listeners might not have readily understood these Canadian cultural references at the time, and Allwright therefore wants to domesticate the text. He changes the “lady of the harbor” to the more-specific Notre Dame. Although Notre Dame contains connotations of its own, Allwright still understood the importance of using a popular monument in a song, and how these references can give listeners a sense of nationalism and pride. Allwright strategically appeals to yéyé listeners and retained a French culture and identity over the “invading” Anglo-American references, but consequently erases Cohen’s Canadian heritage.

Allwright commits yet another act of qualitative impoverishment in the seventh line of the first stanza, this time by changing Cohen’s specific expression “And she feeds you tea and oranges that come all the way from China” to «Elle te sert du thé au jasmin » (“she serves you Jasmine tea”). This may not seem like a significant change to most listeners, since Allwright still

states that Suzanne served food. However, Cohen made a specific choice in using the words “tea and oranges.” In a 1998 interview with Suzanne Verdal McCallister, the same Suzanne who inspired Cohen’s song, she stated that when she spent time with Cohen at her house on the St. Lawrence River, they “had tea together many times and mandarin oranges” (McCallister, interviewed by Saunders). This qualitative impoverishment causes Allwright’s translation to lose the important personal connection of Cohen’s song. Cohen included those lyrics for an autobiographical reason, and by changing it simply to “jasmine tea,” Allwright erases the reference to Cohen’s inspiration and blemishes its iconicity. According to Berman, to play with the equivalence of words is “to attack the discourse of the foreign work” (Berman 251). Basing his translation on the instrumental model of equivalence, Allwright attempts to find a similar word to replace “mandarin oranges” while destroying Cohen’s autobiographical reference.

Even though Allwright rephrases an integral part of the song through qualitative impoverishment, he does remain loyal to the musicality of *Suzanne*. Allwright had the challenge of making the song sound musical despite it being sung in another language. He kept the integral musical components of the song, by “stress[ing] the melodic guitar play and the preservation and even reinforcement of rhyme” (Mus 245). If a listener were to hear the guitar picking, they would be able to easily identify that Allwright’s translated song was *Suzanne*, despite its French lyrics.

While both choruses contain a similar theme of romantic desire and the urge for Suzanne to travel with the speaker (or in Allwright’s translation, the speaker’s urge to follow Suzanne), they do contain some differences. Listeners may consider Cohen’s chorus to be more lyrically poetic since the speaker has “touched her perfect body with [his] mind” instead of the more basic cliché of “a passion burns in your heart” («une flamme brûle dans ton cœur») in Allwright’s

translation. However, the translator had to take his own liberties and bend the text to his needs to overcome language and cultural barriers and communicate the main principle of desire in *Suzanne*. In this instance, instead of looking to the instrumental model for equivalence to Cohen's phrase, Allwright invents his original, yet somewhat weaker phrase by using the hermeneutic model. The hermeneutic model treats translation as an interpretation that takes culture and ethics into account. In modern translation, the hermeneutic model is widely preferred and used, since it creates a greater understanding of the original and translation and creates an original translation. Nevertheless, Allwright followed Steiner's emphasis on faithfulness to the original, as the translated text's meaning is never completely lost; the translation still contains the central character Suzanne, the feelings of romantic longing. Nevertheless, I argue, its effectiveness and impact are diminished.

While the translated *Suzanne* retains most of the original's thematic elements related to love, it loses some of its overtly religious emphases as well. In Cohen's *Suzanne*, the lyrics switch suddenly from love to an obvious biblical allusion of Jesus walking on water ("And Jesus was a sailor // When he walked upon water"). Allwright keeps the biblical allusions, with Jesus being a «pêcheur venu sur la terre» (a fisherman who came to earth) but replaces "walking on water" with Jesus coming to earth. Additionally, Allwright does not refer to Jesus by name, and instead uses «Il», or "He." For a listener who is paying attention, this minor change probably won't cause any confusion. However, the translated version does lose a shock factor by not referencing Jesus by his name; if listeners are not paying close attention, they could quickly miss who «Il» refers to. This is a case of quantitative impoverishment; Allwright replaced his proper name with "Him" (or «Il»). Allwright might have chosen to make the allusion to Christ less evident since France is a more secular than conservative Quebec.

In conclusion, while Allwright's version makes some mistakes of "deformation" in Berman's sense, musically it weighs up to the original. Unfortunately, Cohen's autobiographical elements, like the oranges that the real-life Suzanne ate with him, the opening line "Suzanne takes you down," the overt mentions of Jesus and the references to Canadian/American organizations and landmarks are lost in the translated lyrics. These specific references are what touch listeners and make the original song so lyrically impressive. When Allwright takes these references away, the song becomes more cookie-cutter, similar to any romance song one would hear. While Allwright does make some interesting comparisons between women and sirens, they are made at the expense of women. Additionally, his use of the instrumental model limited Allwright with his translation, since he utilized replacement words and references instead of creating his own interpretation. It is of course difficult to accurately introduce such an original song to a foreign-speaking audience. While Allwright stayed within the confines of the musical tune, his translated version falls victim to qualitative impoverishment. In the end, *Suzanne* is a prime example demonstrating linguist and translator Roman Jakobson's argument that "poetry by definition is untranslatable" (Jakobson 131).

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