Hear, here! Conversations, Equations, Translation: On Jonathan Davidson's *A Commonplace* (2020)

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I like best the silence that is not
Silence but our breathing, the orchestra
Of flesh and thought caught in looped
Arpeggios.
Jonathan Davidson, "The Silence." 2020.

Je préfère le silence qui n'est pas
Silence mais respiration, l'orchestre
De chair et de pensée, prisonnier d'un arpège,
En boucle.
Amélie Doche (trans.), "Le Silence." 2020.

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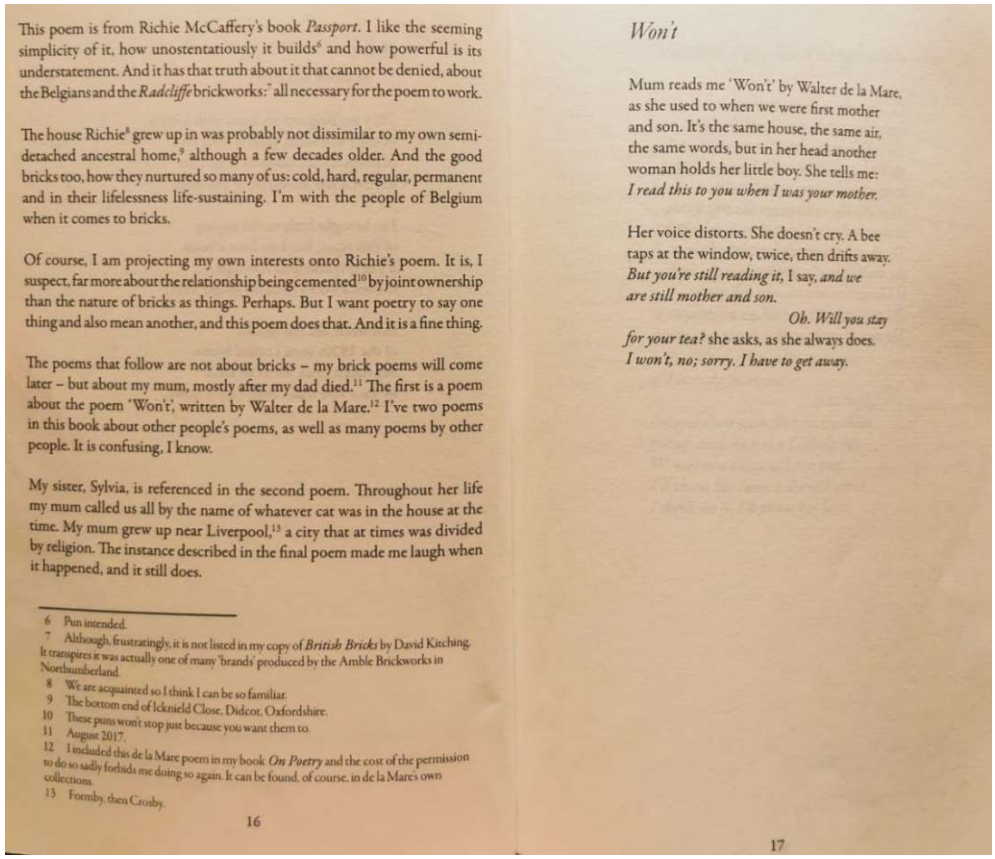
Foreword

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered many conversations about the importance of poetry – and indeed the arts more generally – in times of isolation (Doche). In an article entitled "From Ovid to Covid: Why Poetry is Enjoying a Renaissance," Katy Shaw declares that "poetry offers comfort by imposing order on otherwise seemingly random events" (*New Statesman*). Specifically, the poetry of the everyday, with its focus on personal experiences and memories – but also "apples," (Davidson, 59) "bricks," (15) and "back roads" (22) – has provided a sense of grounding. Much like bricks, poetry's low thermal conductivity can sometimes preserve ourselves from the outside coolness. Throughout the pandemic, poetry has reasserted its power to act as a conduit between the outside and the inside, the "I" and the Other. Vision happened to be the theme of National Poetry Day 2020. On this occasion, poets Caroline Bird, Karl Nova and Malika Booker gave us a glimpse into their experiences of the world. Additionally, they encouraged poets and non-poets to use poetry as a medium to share experiences, memories, and uncertainties. In March 2020, Fair Acre Press published *These are the Hands: Poems from the Heart of the NHS*, a poetry collection edited by the *Emergency Poet* Deborah Alma, and Dr Katie Amiel. The collection has been instrumental in enabling NHS workers to write about their experiences. More importantly, readers have been offered the opportunity to see the world through other people's eyes. The pandemic seems to have increased our need for connectedness. After all, as Julian Barnes writes: "everything is connected, even the parts we don't like, especially the parts we don't like" (76). While connectedness and the sharing of experiences have been significant, much humour is needed to face the practical and emotional complexities brought about by the crisis. The Covid-19 update on The National Poetry Day website states that "[t]he humanity and humour conjured up by a shared line of poetry is a powerful antidote to isolation." Davidson's *A Commonplace: Apples, Bricks & Other People's Poems* provides humour and connectedness. *The Yorkshire Times* literary editor, Steve Whitaker, describes the collection as follows:

> Conceived without a rigid structure – a rendition, in a long line of

renditions, of a Renaissance 'Commonplace' book – this short, pithy take on verses that are meaningful to him, gives Davidson latitude for a conversational, sometimes conspiratorial, style which is pretty much unique, even in informal critical circles.



This poem is from Richie McCaffery's book *Passport*. I like the seeming simplicity of it, how unostentatiously it builds[6] and how powerful is its understatement. And it has that truth about it that cannot be denied, about the Belgians and the *Radcliffe* brickworks:[7] all necessary for the poem to work.

The house Richie[8] grew up in was probably not dissimilar to my own semi-detached ancestral home,[9] although a few decades older. And the good bricks too, how they nurtured so many of us: cold, hard, regular, permanent and in their lifelessness life-sustaining. I'm with the people of Belgium when it comes to bricks.

Of course, I am projecting my own interests onto Richie's poem. It is, I suspect, far more about the relationship being cemented[10] by joint ownership than the nature of bricks as things. Perhaps. But I want poetry to say one thing and also mean another, and this poem does that. And it is a fine thing.

The poems that follow are not about bricks – my brick poems will come later – but about my mum, mostly after my dad died.[11] The first is a poem about the poem 'Won't', written by Walter de la Mare.[12] I've two poems in this book about other people's poems, as well as many poems by other people. It is confusing, I know.

My sister, Sylvia, is referenced in the second poem. Throughout her life my mum called us all by the name of whatever cat was in the house at the time. My mum grew up near Liverpool,[13] a city that at times was divided by religion. The instance described in the final poem made me laugh when it happened, and it still does.

6 Pun intended.
7 Although, frustratingly, it is not listed in my copy of *British Bricks* by David Kitching. It transpires it was actually one of many 'brands' produced by the Amble Brickworks in Northumberland.
8 We are acquainted so I think I can be so familiar.
9 The bottom end of Icknield Close, Didcot, Oxfordshire.
10 These puns won't stop just because you want them to.
11 August 2017.
12 I included this de la Mare poem in my book *On Poetry* and the cost of the permission to do so sadly forbids me doing so again. It can be found, of course, in de la Mare's own collections.
13 Formby, then Crosby.

16

Won't

Mum reads me 'Won't' by Walter de la Mare,
as she used to when we were first mother
and son. It's the same house, the same air,
the same words, but in her head another
woman holds her little boy. She tells me:
I read this to you when I was your mother.

Her voice distorts. She doesn't cry. A bee
taps at the window, twice, then drifts away.
But you're still reading it, I say, *and we*
are still mother and son.
Oh. Will you stay
for your tea? she asks, as she always does.
I won't, no; sorry. I have to get away.

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FIGURE 1. © Davidson, Jonathan. "Pages 16-17." A Commonplace, 2020.

The above picture indeed evidences Whitaker's description. Two adjectives would accurately define Davidson's work: ground-breaking and heretical. Davidson endorses the latter by declaring that "heresy is [his] middle name" (11). In fact, *A Commonplace* revels in its hybridity and in-betweenness. While poems make up the major part of Davidson's "lived art form," the collection also includes (unruly) footnotes, a commentary, a gazetteer, and a bibliography. Davidson uses a "conversational," "conspiratorial," and "unique" style which foregrounds directness, self-

awareness, and self-referentiality (Whitaker). These features enable Davidson to counterbalance the gravity of such poems as "Father" (23) and "Utopia" (42). Davidson's artistic deviations have – much like a domino effect – triggered other artistic deviations on the part of independently-minded readers. Writer and philosopher Will Buckingham, for instance, has reinvented Davidson's "Borders" by adding twelve additional footnotes to the original poem. Jonathan Davidson's website features his deviation ("*A Commonplace* – Deviations"). Reviewing *A Commonplace* for *3:AM Magazine*, Fiona Glen writes:

> In his Enthusiast!, David Herd describes enthusiasm as '[the desire] to pass things on. Plato put it in terms of magnetic rings, Shaftesbury described it as 'an itch of imparting', of 'kindling the same fire in other breasts'. My enthusiasm is kindled and itched (or tickled?) by Davidson's. Writing about his writing, I find myself borrowing his directness, find myself wanting to tell you, truly, that these are poems that I will carry, use, and live with.

Writing about his writing, I find myself borrowing his self-awareness, humour, and self-referentiality. In this context, the phrasal expression 'find oneself' denotes the fact that someone has become aware of something they have been doing. In other words, it seems that neither the writer Fiona Glen nor I have actively decided to emulate Davidson's style. Unconscious emulation certainly reveals our strong engagement with Davidson's collection, which calls for such a response. With this in mind, considering *A Commonplace* as an 'object' of study seems particularly inappropriate. Conventions of research in the Western world have tended to privilege a Cartesian atomistic perspective, which marks the knower and the known and the subject and object of research as utterly separate through the adoption of a 'scientific gaze.' Indigenous forms of knowledge and relational ontologies have, however, emphasised entanglement over separability. On page 92, Davidson declares that "poem[s] read him," thus challenging the subject-object divide. Similarly, "J.A. Miller, Lacan' s son-in-law, once said: 'we do not read Lacan, Lacan reads us'" (Lecercle, 100). These quotations demonstrate that 'knower' and 'known' interweave with each other. According to Karen Barad,

"existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not exist prior to their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (ix). In fact, the reader's interaction – or rather, *intra-action*, to borrow Barad's term – with *A Commonplace* may give them the epistemic agency to speak the author's voice as their own. The neologism 'intra-action' signifies the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad, 33). Coming back to the domino effect, *A Commonplace* here works as the primal cause of a motion:

> Process metaphysics centralizes the ideas of prehension (sensing or feeling) and concrescence (becoming actual). The basic entities in this view are occasions that prehend other fully actualized entities and respond creatively to become actual themselves through harmonizing everything prehended (concrescence), after which they can influence other entities (Wildman, 65).

In other words, each of our intra-actions actualises a potential which may in turn actualise other potentials. Because relational ontologies attest the primacy of (open and indefinite) relations over (closed and finite) entities, they embrace idiosyncratic experiences, which have in the past been deemed as unworthy of investigations. Creative and academic responses to the Covid-19 pandemic appear to have challenged these deeply-ingrained thoughts and practices.

Relations cannot be studied from the outside. For this reason, this hybrid piece – which comprises a book review, a translation, a translation commentary, a reflection about translation, and a few words from the poet Jonathan Davidson – provides readers with a sense of my felt reading experience of Davidson's *A Commonplace*. My writing style purposefully intertwines with that of the author. Readers of *A Commonplace* may experience a feeling of *déjà-vu*; people who are not familiar with the work may have a glimpse into the reading experience. The creative-critical piece, which presents itself as a performance, has a threefold purpose. As far as Davidson's *A Commonplace* is concerned, it seeks to enable readers to experience the collection as a lived and multivocal artform. In turn, this piece encourages readers to actualise the potential of the book by embracing the deviations that result from our

daily intra-actions with people, socio-material environment(s), and literary artefacts. Finally, this piece hopes to show like-minded literary translators that engaging with the author of the source text can be a stimulating and enriching experience, heightening enthusiasm for, and curiosity about, the translation process.

To fulfil these aims, the paper deploys an organic structure which invites to-and-fro-movements between Davidson's work and my experience and interpretation of it. After having set out the relational frame which motivates this study in this foreword, I provide a detailed introduction to the salient features of the poetry collection *A Commonplace* in the section entitled 'The Art of Conversation'. Then, I include – by kind permission of the author and his publisher The Poetry Business – one of my favourite poems of the collection "A Quadratic Equation" as well as a few insights from Davidson himself pertaining to the craft of the poem. Davidson's reflection on "A Quadratic Equation" is followed by my own thoughts about 'the art of translation'. The last two sections of this creative-critical piece feature my French translation of Davidson's poem ("Une équation du second degré") and a translation commentary.

A Commonplace: Apples, Bricks & Other People's Poems

I encountered Jonathan Davidson's *A Commonplace: Apples, Bricks & Other People's Poems* at its virtual launch, which I attended from my hometown of Belleville-en-Beaujolais on the evening of the 2nd August 2020. The book launch very much fulfilled its purpose. By this I mean that *yes*, I enjoyed listening to Jonathan Davidson his editor Peter Sansom and the guest poets Sue Brown, Jo Bell and Gregory Leadbetter talking about poetry; *yes,* I was definitely going to read the collection from cover to cover; *yes*, I intended to find out more about Davidson's poetics of the common. This was a year ago. I am now the proud owner of *A Commonplace* – or it may be that *A Commonplace* owns me. I am not quite sure anymore.

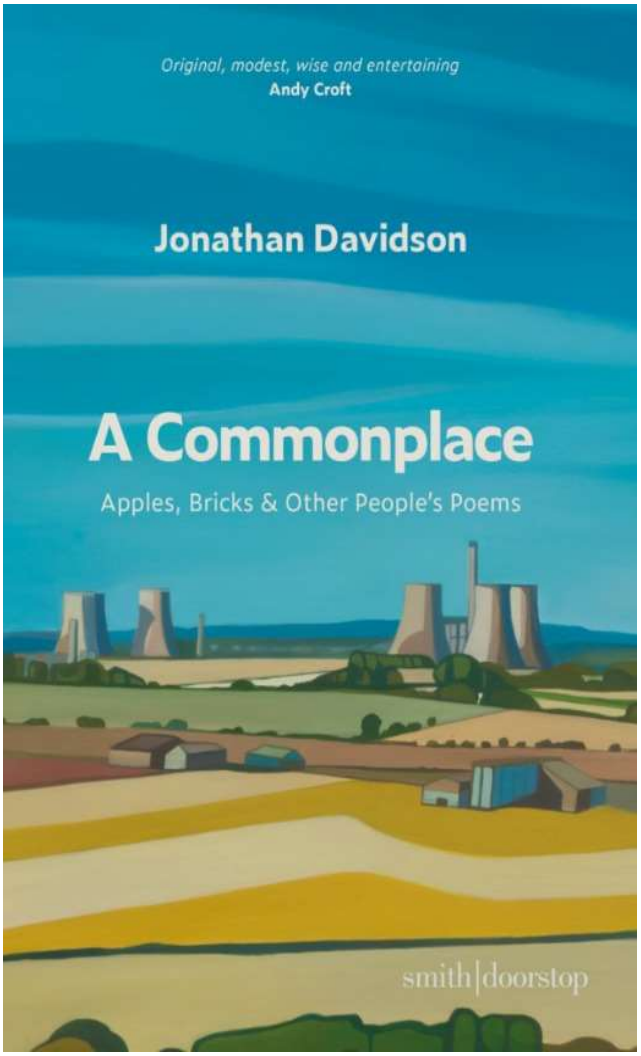

FIGURE 2. © Dillon, Anna. "The Industrial Henge." A Commonplace, 2020.

The Art of Conversation

The back-cover blurb indicates that *A Commonplace* is "a dialogue about how poetry is made and how it makes a difference to our lives." All I can say is that (for once?) the blurb is to be trusted. Davidson's *A Commonplace* encourages dialogic transactions[1] between author and readers, and the latter are expected to take part in the creative process (though they are also permitted to sit back and relax).

Several features enable the establishment of a genuine conversation between Jonathan Davidson, *A Commonplace*, and readers. I have listed and detailed the five main ones below:

1) As the title suggests, A Commonplace includes Other People's Poems.

In fact, the collection presents poetry from sixteen other poets and translators. While most poems were composed in the UK, Davidson informs his readers that some pieces were written from outside the UK. *A Commonplace* transcends "borders" (Davidson, 43). Moreover, Davidson's poetic work embraces polyvocality: through the poet's various voices, readers become familiar with such figures as the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa or the English geologist William Smith. *A Commonplace* occurs across time. By assembling words, voices, and cultures together, *A Commonplace* creates a "we" i.e., a "common," which both emerges from and performs Otherness. In *3:AM Magazine*, Fiona Glen argues that *A Commonplace*'s "openness, generosity and polyvocality [seems like] a political project" ("Sharing grounds"). I would concur.

2) The inclusion of an ongoing commentary, which acts as a co-pilot/friend/guide.

When driving, I expect my co-pilot to simultaneously execute two tasks: (a) direct me (i.e., provide relevant temporal and spatial deixis, such as "Turn left! Now!") and (b) keep me awake and entertained (especially if

[1] Transaction comes from the Latin *trans-* "across, beyond, through" and *agere* "to set in motion, drive, drive forward." Here, I mean that the reader is invited to propel the creative process forward in the real world.

we happen to be stuck on the M5). Davidson's commentary successfully meets the first expectation (yes, I am going to talk about the second expectation – see point 3). It guides the reader in two different ways. First, it provides information about what comes next, hence the prominence of temporal deixis, such as the adverb "now" and the verbs "follow" and "finish," which are used almost exclusively in the commentary. This practical purpose is combined with a higher purpose: guiding readers through the process of interpretation by providing context for the poems.

> Now [temporal deixis], some poems about people I am not [polyvocality]. And one by Zaffar Kunial [other people's poems] about someone he may be. Notes about all the poems follow [temporal deixis] in the commentary (Davidson, 28).

3) ***It is universally acknowledged that footnotes serve the purpose of presenting additional information. In A Commonplace, not only do they add supplementary information, they also directly address readers in two ways.***

The first type of address includes direct questions to the reader: "what is your favourite sea?" (34), "how do you manage your grief?" (39), "what's your favourite prehistoric road?" (86). These questions incentivise readers to interact with the author beyond the fictional universe. In fact, a few of Davidson's readers have shared their answers to the said questions via social media (read: Twitter). The second type of address is less dialogic insofar as Davidson first acknowledges his readers' voices to then silence them. Here are a few examples: "These puns won't stop just because you want them to" (16) or "A Pukka Pad Jotta. The notebook of champions. Accept no substitute" (24). Authoritarian in nature,[2] these footnotes trigger a reaction from readers, who find themselves either converging with or diverging from the poet's statements. I found myself thinking: "No, Oxford My Notes A5 is the notebook of champions." Diverging opinions are bound to rebel – albeit internally – against the propositions

[2] This impression results from grammatical (positive and negative) polarity items.

advanced by the poet. As such, footnotes certainly keep readers alert and entertained; together with the commentary, they successfully fulfil the function of co-pilot (see point 2) by engaging and sustaining dialogue. As a nod to *A Commonplace,* my own use of footnotes shall be slightly heretical.

4) ***The commentary ends with: "Thank you for your kind attention" (Davidson, 92).***

This final line is more akin to an oral presentation than to a commentary in that acknowledgements tend to precede comments, questions, and potential feedback on the part of the audience. As Davidson points out, "having trained ourselves to read quickly, having been encouraged to gobble up the pages because so many other pages are frying in the pan like noisy sausages, it is not easy to take each line of poetry as it comes" (*On Poetry,* 34). Reading empathetically and critically is the *sine qua non* for receiving a text and establishing genuine dialogue both with the text itself and with its creator. María Lugones considers empathy as a form of "world-travelling" (3) – I would add that, as far as poetry is concerned, empathy is a form of *slow* "world-travelling;" it is a process upon which the passage from the readers' world to the poet's world depends. "Thank you for your attention" is a gentle reminder that world-travelling, and thus dialogue, is only possible if we both actively *listen* and genuinely *hear* what is being shared with us in the first place.

5) ***Finally, towards the end of the collection, the poet explicitly encourages his readers to share his poems further, either publicly or privately. "The sharing's the thing" (Davidson, 92).***

First, let us remember that literature does not stop after we reach the last word of the book. *A Commonplace*, like all good poetry, is a cheap lifelong investment: each reading arouses new responses. As such, literary dialogue is ongoing. Davidson prompts readers to complement their private (re)readings with lived experiences of his poems. In fact, his readers are given the possibility to record their own readings of the poems and to share them with the poet himself, who provides a dedicated space for the audio files on his website: "*A Commonplace* – the Everyday

Reader." Experiencing a poem through several voices is rather wonderful. I now wish it was common practice. Davidson also mentions that he is interested translated poetry. A such, he invites readers, poets and translators to make his words their own, in the language of their choice, should they wish to embark on this journey.[3] The best kind of journey, if you want my opinion. I decided to translate Davidson's "A Quadratic Equation."[4] No, I am not a keen mathematician. In fact, I was half-hoping that the translation process would exorcise my mathematical daemons. I am afraid to report that it did not.

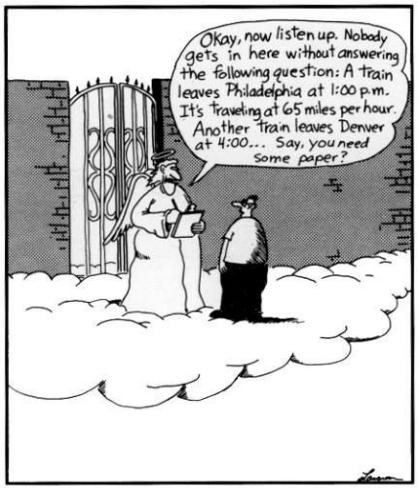

FIGURE 3. © Larson, Gary. "The Far Side." Pinterest, 2013, https://gr.pinterest.com/pin/285851253834478865/. Accessed 7 August 2021.

[3] "It makes quite a journey: you'll need a flask and some sandwiches" (Davidson, 12).

[4] Because who does not like a little challenge?

A Quadratic Equation

By Jonathan Davidson

A dad and a daughter are solving a quadratic equation.
They are seeking the value of x using the appropriate process,
beginning with factorisation. A solution is proving elusive;
they are outside the problem looking in at curtained windows.

Upstairs a son, who's employed in the building trade, plays guitar
unaware of the mathematical impossibility of 'equal temperament'.
And a mum is in the front room working out the likelihood
of character a killing character b before the end of the episode.

The daughter and the son cross on the stairs. She is fractious
and has been sent to bed, while the dad puts in a couple more hours,
but to no avail. Whatever the value of x they shan't know tonight.
And perhaps x has no value. Or perhaps it has many values.

Perhaps it is discovered in the dissonant chords that the son
untangles, or in the loaded silence between character a
and character b before the gun goes off, or perhaps it's simply
that which cannot be expressed although it is known to exist.

Jonathan Davidson: On Composing "A Quadratic Equation," 20 November 2020.

I asked Jonathan Davidson in a personal email how he began composing "A Quadratic Equation." Here is the answer:

FIGURE 4. © Allen, Lee. "Jonathan Davidson." 2020.

"A Quadratic Equation" was a poem whose central idea came easily but which demanded dozens of drafts before it settled into its current form. I admire poems that can say one thing and mean another, although in this one I came close to saying one thing and meaning just that (such as 'love cannot be known'). Once the idea has been arrived at, my task was to get as much from it as I could without 'over-cooking' it, as it were. My argument was fairly clear, so at no point did I think it would collapse on itself, as some poems are wont to do. In fact, it was entered for many competitions (in the years when I was still entering competitions) and only after four years did it get noticed. It was clearly a poem out of kilter with the times, perhaps because it is 'clever' rather than impassioned.

In fact, I think it is very important to hold our passions in check in our art. So much of the art is in restraint. Well, it has now been published and it is journeying out to whether it may go in the minds and voices of readers. I hope people will spend a little time actually taking it apart and seeing how it works, because I am rather proud of what's 'under the bonnet', the engineering, as it were. While it is nothing like as elegant as solving a quadratic equation, it has qualities which might please some.[5]

[5] Jonathan Davidson is a poet, writer, and literature activist. He lives in the English Midlands but works internationally. His poetry has been widely published and he has also written memoirs and criticism. His radio dramas and adaptations have been broadcast by BBC Radio 3 and 4. Much of his work is focussed on how writing – especially poetry – is experienced by readers and listeners (jonathandavidson.net).

The Art of Translation

Translation is about "mak[ing] someone else's voice sing" (Rose, 15). The voices I take great pleasure in translating sing inside me. Only when the song becomes too loud for me to contain does the act of translation begin. This is the signal which tells me that the concert needs to make noise elsewhere. I have a great fondness and admiration for Davidson's poetry. *A Commonplace* immediately sang to me. It has joined Wendy Cope's *Anecdotal Evidence*, John Ashbery's *Shadow Train* and a few others in the pile of poetry which is not to be stored in my library but rather in a strategic space (i.e., easily retrievable) in my room, that is, my desk or bedside table.

I am now acquainted with Jonathan Davidson. I mention this because I have been asked if knowing the poet makes me feel more anxious about finding the *mot juste*.[6] The simple answer is 'no', but I shall, of course, elaborate. First, I do not know what to make of the *mot juste*. In translation, "a choice of tactics, a choice of language, is inevitable, and the awareness of this can be paralysing or exhilarating" (France, 261). I would tend to side with exhilaration, though paralysis does invite itself at times. Translation materialises one's act of reading. It is commonly agreed that one text will generate many different responses on the part of readers. To me, the beauty of a literary text lies in the diversity of responses it generates.

FIGURE 5. © dailysimpsons. "Ah! Le Mot Juste!" Twitter, 2019, https://twitter.com/dailysimpsons/status/1196540521193205761. Accessed 7 August 2021.

(A) All translation is reading; (b) all reading is interpretation; (c)

[6] Reader: consider yourself lucky if you don't get the reference. If you do: sacré Flaubert!

therefore, all "translation is interpretation" (Rose, 57). Syllogisms are great, don't you think? Anyway, what I am trying to say is that a poem can be read and translated in different fashions. Conceptualising a translation as one interpretation among many (as *a* translation rather than *the* translation) alleviates the anxiety that springs from one's pursuit of the *mot juste*. I very much enjoy reading different translations of the same text. I have read, for instance, Joseph Laredo's, Matthew Ward's and Sandra Smith's translations of Albert Camus's 1942, *L'étranger*. Yes, I am a strange person, but that is not the point. The point is that, among other things, each of the translators offers a different reading of Camus's opening line: "Aujourd'hui, Maman est morte" ("Mother died today," *"Maman* died today," and "My mother died today"). I find that fascinating. (Re)Reading translations feels like looking at the same picture through different filters. The image remains the same but, each time, different features are foregrounded in attention as 'figures' while others are unattended as 'grounds'.[7] As a result, the original work gains extra layers of meaning which enrich the immediate[8] literary experience.

It would not be entirely accurate to say that anxiety fades into nothingness. Translating a work you love always generates some sense of responsibility. I hold some texts so close to my heart that the thought of not being able to render their greatness sometimes proves paralysing. So, no, knowing the poet does not induce anxiety – knowing the poem does. I want the poem to sing for other people like it sings for me; and I am always slightly concerned about damaging it in the process. I believe that feeling a sense of responsibility is somehow necessary; it acts as a catalyst for dedication. To ease the burden responsibility may bring, I remember a thought that Jonathan Davidson shared with me in a private correspondence: "poetry can never really be broken, only forgotten."

[7] I am borrowing the concepts of 'figure' and 'ground' from Gestalt psychology.

[8] The 'immediate' aesthetic experience is, of course, always mediated, through (a) language and (b) the materiality of the book, if applicable. Adding layers of interpretation enables the poem to be mediated further.

Une équation du second degré

By Jonathan Davidson.

Translated by Amélie Doche

Un papa et une fille tâchent de résoudre une équation du second degré.
Ils cherchent la valeur de x en suivant la procédure indiquée,
à commencer par la factorisation. La solution leur échappe -
ils observent le problème depuis la fenêtre extérieure, embuée.

A l'étage, un fils, employé dans le secteur du bâtiment, joue de la guitare
sans avoir conscience de l'impossibilité mathématique de la 'gamme tempérée'.
Et, dans le salon, une maman examine la probabilité
que le personnage A tue le personnage B avant la fin de l'épisode.

La fille et le fils se croisent dans l'escalier. Elle est irritable et soustraite
de ses obligations, a été envoyée au lit, tandis que le papa continue de travailler,
en vain. Quelle que soit la valeur de x, ils ne la connaîtront point ce soir.
Peut-être que x n'a pas de valeur. Ou peut-être que x a beaucoup de valeurs.

Peut-être que sa valeur se trouve dans les accords dissonants que le fils
démêle ou dans le silence tendu entre le personnage A
et le personnage B avant la détonation, ou peut-être qu'elle est simplement
ce qui ne peut être exprimé, bien que son existence soit avérée.

On Translating "A Quadratic Equation:" "Sometimes the fix is in the flaw"[9]

But what if there are no flaws? What if "A Quadratic Equation" achieves the unachievable? What, then, is a translator supposed to do? This poem reads like the most elaborate of card castles, which did make me wonder if and how I could do it justice. When translation panic strikes, I embrace Kate Brigg's words: "however difficult translation may sometimes be, as distinct from creation it is fundamentally risk-free" (252). Hurray![10] That being said, towards the end of *This Little Art*, Briggs does acknowledge that the risk of "fucking it up" (265) is very real indeed. I regularly remind myself to forget about it.

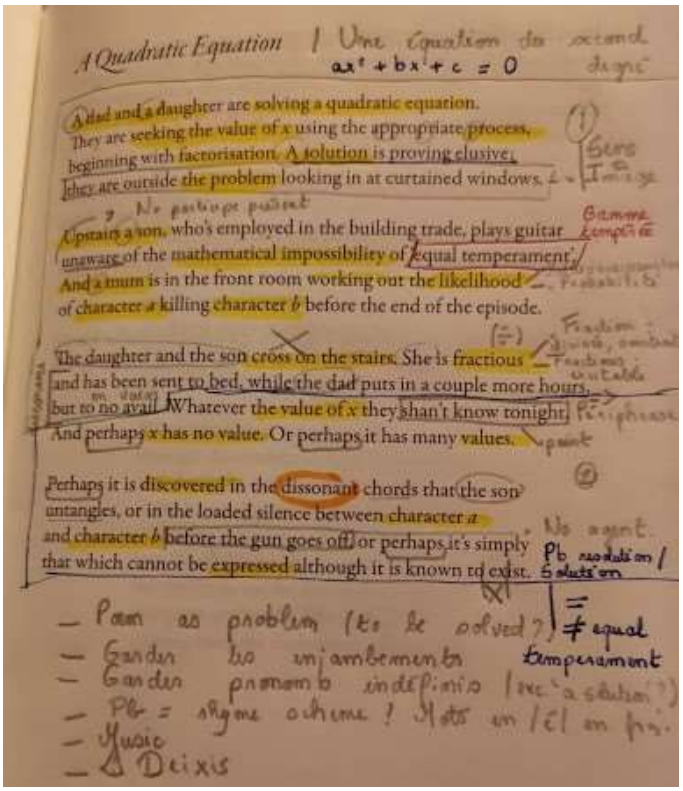

FIGURE 6. © Doche, Amélie. "My annotations / linguistic equations." A Commonplace, 2020.

The poem presents an equation and, to some extent, presents itself as an equation. Two features strike me as salient: the play on maths, at the levels of lexis, syntax, and semantics (words highlighted in yellow), and the musicality of the poem, which reveals itself when read out loud. To me, these are the features which should not get *lost in translation*.

[9] See Leadbetter, Gregory. *Maskwork*. Nine Arches Press, 2020, p. 23.

[10] Writers: please accept my apologies.

I shall start by mentioning the elements which may have gotten lost in translation. The first stanza ends on: "A solution is proving elusive;/ they are outside the problem looking in at curtained windows." I find the image of the "curtained windows" very powerful. However, when thinking about ways to translate it, I felt that I had to choose between imagery and meaning. The latter seemed more important. Ideally, different means (imagery) would achieve the same end (meaning). I translated this line as: " La solution leur échappe;/ Ils observent le problème depuis la fenêtre extérieure, embuée." The literal English translation of my translation would be: "they look at the problem from the outside, steamed-up window." "Embuée" ("steamed up") suggests an organic or anthropomorphic life – i.e., the solution *lives* inside the house. In any case, the key element here is that the problem remains unsolvable. Since I privilege the source text's meaning over the source text's wording, my translation sacrifices the word "curtain." Jonathan Davidson has told me that curtains are quite significant in British culture, hence such words as curtain-twitcher.[11] I am sorry to say that curtains do not generate much excitement in France, which may be why we do not have a word to translate "curtain-twitcher." This may explain why I did not feel particularly guilty about leaving the curtains aside. As Julie Rose argues, "[a]ll of this makes translating a unique category of writing, one that takes place in the elastic space between two cultural spheres, where language and culture are always being quizzed and stretched" (14). Coming back to Davidson's poem, the idea of the solution being trapped inside a (Pandora's?) box in the last line of the first stanza ("outside the problem looking in") is a kind of trope in English. The poetic and

FIGURE 7. © Poole, Bruce. "Curtain-twitcher." Flickr, 2012, https://www.flickr.com/photos/brucepoole/8548951815. Accessed 7 August 2021.

[11] In *On Poetry*, Davidson writes: "I didn't know who Geoffrey Hill was, but I had a sense that he had things to teach me, about phrase-making and verse-speaking and the matter of England" (73). I feel the same about Jonathan Davidson.

hopefully thought-provoking phrase "fenêtre extérieure" does not quite capture that notion. At the same time, this English trope does not resonate with my French self. Laetitia Bedeker and Ilse Feinauer consider the translator as a cultural mediator. According to them, translators should not only "analyse the author's intentions towards the source culture receivers, but also the ability of the target culture receivers to coordinate the source text information with their own situation and expectations" (134). I certainly agree that (cross-)cultural knowledge is necessary in the creation of a target text which could stand on its own in the target culture. Additionally, translators need to be able to decide which cultural elements can be successfully transposed onto another culture and which ones will have to be replaced to meet the knowledge and expectations of the target audience.

Let us now focus on the salient features of the source text, i.e., the mathematical language and the musicality. In that respect, the following passage was particularly challenging to translate: "She is fractious / and has been sent to bed, while the dad puts in a couple more hours / but to no avail." The adjective "fractious" echoes the noun "fraction." "Fractious" can be translated as "irritable," "rétif" or "grognon" in French. However, none of these words resonate with a mathematical term. I spent quite some time wondering how to translate both the word's meaning and its mathematical resonance. It took me a few weeks and one friend[12] to work something out - here is my suggestion:

> La fille et le fils se croisent dans l'escalier. Elle est irritable **et soustraite de ses obligations,** a été envoyée au lit, tandis que le papa continue de travailler, en vain. Quelle que soit la valeur de x, ils ne la connaîtront point ce soir.
>
> Peut-être que x n'a pas de valeur. Ou peut-être que x a beaucoup de valeurs.

"Irritable" translates the meaning of "fractious" while "soustraite de ses obligations" renders the mathematical imagery. "Soustraite de ses obligations" means "freed from her duties." Although the latter is implied

[12] My warmest thanks to Ilona Albertino for her invaluable insights.

in the original version (the daughter is sent to bed, she is therefore exempt from spending more time on her homework), it is not explicitly written. I do not think that adding this periphrasis changes the meaning of the poem. What it does do, however, is translate the mathematicality of the English poem. "Soustraire" means "to subtract." In French, the verb "soustraire" can be followed by two prepositions: "à" and "de." In other words, I can say that the daughter is "soustraite à ses obligations" or "soustraite de ses obligations." I decided to opt for the preposition "de" which sounds slightly more formal and mathematical.[13] I would naturally be more inclined to say "soustraite à," which may be, oddly enough, why I lean towards "soustraite de." Davidson's poem is both smoothly dissonant and perfectly engineered. Part of the translation process, for me, involved resisting and transforming natural inclinations.

Introducing a mathematical term in the translation seemed all the more important as I could not translate "likelihood" by "vraisemblance," which is its official mathematical translation (e.g., "maximum likelihood" and "log-likelihood" are respectively translated as "maximum de vraisemblance" and "log-vraisemblance"). This is for three reasons. First, in French, "examiner la vraisemblance" sounds particularly odd; secondly, "probabilité" is a mathematical term (e.g., "density function" is translated as "densité de probabilité"); and finally, I had by that time decided to introduce end rhymes in /é/. Why? I would say, both out of necessity, and to translate the poem's musicality. In the source text, the musicality comes from the rhythm and the scansion. On that note, I would definitely recommend listening readings of "A Quadratic Equation" by the poets Sue Brown and Gregory Leadbetter.[14] After I had translated the first stanza of the poem, I realised that the end words rhymed, which did not surprise me given the impressive number of words ending in /é/ in the French language. While my translation does not have a rhyming scheme *per se*, I actively decided to use more words ending in /é/ to distinguish between what I perceived to be two distinct sections in

[13] French readers: please refer to the CNRTL definitions for an in-depth exploration of the phrasal verb "soustraire à/de:" https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/soustraire.

[14] The recordings can be found here: https://jonathandavidson.net/a-commonplace-the-everyday-reader/.

Davidson's poem. "A Quadratic Equation" seems to divide into two parts: 1) The problem, from "A dad and a daughter" until "to no avail." 2) The resolution, from "whatever the value of x" until the end. Davidson later confirmed that these two parts were intended as such. He also reminded me that "A Quadratic Equation" recalls the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet. I did not think of it when I divided the poem into two parts. The fact that this lack of awareness did not prevent me from clearly distinguishing between these sections means that the poem succeeds (in being a great poem). In the first part of the poem (i.e., the problem), words ending in /é/ predominate both within and at the end of the lines: see "degré," "indiquée," "commencer," "embuée," "employé," "impossibilité," "tempérée," "probabilité," "B," "escalier" and "travailler." The second part (i.e., the resolution), however, purposefully does not feature such a rhyme scheme. I reintroduce the sound /é/ in the very last line "ce qui ne peut être ***exprimé***, bien que son existence soit ***avérée***" to echo the first section of the poem. The correspondence of sounds between the first section and the very last line hints at the fact that the value of x (or the value of the poem) may be found in the poem itself. After all, the last stanza does specify that the value(s) of x may be:

> discovered in the dissonant chords that the son
>
> untangles, or in the loaded silence between character *a*
>
> and character *b* before the gun goes off, or perhaps it's simply
>
> that which cannot be expressed although it is known to exist.

I see translation as a chance to become familiar – or should I say intimate – with works that speak to me. It feels like making new friends. Like the best of friends, they turn up at your door without having been invited. My translation is certainly not perfect. It may not even be finished, "but then again it is" (Davidson, 28); it exists. And thinking that it may be one among others is liberating.[15] I find Sasha Dugdale's comparison of the reading and translation processes very interesting. She writes: "when I read I take in, I consider the poem and trace it, whereas

[15] Asking for a friend: my French translation feels lonely.

when I translate I process the unconscious workings of the poem through my own unconscious, it doesn't rest with me, but passes through me like a current" ("Deep Breathing," 49). It seems to me that, even if the act of translation enables the concert of words to make noise elsewhere (i.e., to perform outside of my head – thanks!), the words will always be back. Sometimes, when out for a walk, my thoughts get interrupted by lines of poetry, both 'original' and 'translated'. By that time, the words have been processed and written down, the translation has been read and spoken, and the bonding has occurred. The words and I can sing in harmony.

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