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► **To cite this version:**

Charl Pierre Naudé. A Road Going Both Ways. IFAS Working Paper Series / Les Cahiers de l' IFAS, 2005, 6, p. 24-31. hal-00797959

**HAL Id: hal-00797959**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00797959>**

Submitted on 7 Mar 2013

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*Les Nouveaux Cahiers de l'IFAS*  
*IFAS Working Paper Series*

# **Translation - Transnation**

**1994 – 2004**

**Dix ans d'échanges littéraires entre  
l'Afrique du Sud et la France**

*Ten years of literary exchange  
between South Africa and France*

**Numéro special**

**Rassemblé et dirigé par Jean-Pierre RICHARD,  
Université Paris 7, en collaboration avec  
Denise GODWIN, rédactrice de l'AFSSA**

*Special issue*

*collated and edited by Jean-Pierre RICHARD,  
University of Paris 7, in collaboration with  
AFSSA editor, Denise GODWIN*



Association for French Studies in Southern Africa  
Association des Études Françaises en Afrique Australe

*N° 6, August 2005*

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*To Sello Duiker and Phaswane Mpe*

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# A Road Going Both Ways

Charl-Pierre Naudé

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## Abstract

*Cet article est une contribution personnelle à certaines des questions de et autour de la traduction qui ont été abordées au colloque de mars 2005. Charl-Pierre Naudé donne son point de vue sur la signification de la traduction et souligne quels ont pu être les apports du colloque. Premièrement, l'article définit une conception de la « traduction » comme une facette de la création qui est perceptible dès l'acte original de création. Dans un pays comme l'Afrique du Sud, qui ne s'est ouvert à lui-même que récemment, la « traduction » tient une place très visible dans la vie de tous les jours des citoyens sud-africains et se présente sous différentes formes et incarnations. L'auteur de l'article, un poète afrikaans qui écrit aussi en anglais et qui a grandi dans un foyer pratiquant les deux langues, explique ensuite pourquoi il a choisi d'écrire en afrikaans. Il se prononce également sur le choix de la langue d'écriture, pourquoi, selon lui, écrire dans une langue locale n'est pas forcément mieux que d'écrire dans une langue internationale comme l'anglais ou le français que choisissent certains auteurs africains. Les deux options semblent présenter des avantages et des inconvénients. L'article explique pourquoi le groupe linguistique afrikaans, divisé par l'apartheid entre « Coloureds » (Métis) et Blancs, pourrait ne pas résister à cette profonde déchirure. Il s'agit en effet d'un groupe linguistique qui est obligé, dans le contexte post-apartheid, de se « traduire à lui-même ». Selon Charl-Pierre Naudé, l'Afrique du Sud a désespérément besoin d'échanges culturels sous la forme d'une double traduction et il donne l'exemple de la façon dont il estime que la poésie sud-africaine est aujourd'hui en train de s'atrophier précisément par manque d'échanges. Ceux-ci ne pourraient que profiter à la « Renaissance africaine » et prévenir le retour des vieux démons. La survie du monde repose sur sa diversité, une diversité, conclut l'article, qui doit, par définition, être véhiculée par la traduction.*

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Where does “original” writing end, and where does translation start? Seeing that a writer is also translating *himself* internally to *herself* during the creative act, it appears that the original creative impulse itself breaks down into translation at its very root.

Writing a poem or a novel entails, inter alia, *translating* from private sensation into the world of social language. “Translation” is thus a constituent part of the writing process, from beginning to end. Even “inspiration” is a whisper – passing from one part of oneself to another.

And, writing in South Africa today, in a situation where “rewriting” – in the sense of revisiting history and prior writing – is sometimes strongly emphasized, the “original” act of writing might be exceptionally keenly felt as an “act of translation”.

When I go looking for that instance of “original impulse”, the unique moment that might give birth to a poem, call it authenticity, for that “new” or different view, that moment which conjures up the

illusion of “first arrival” – an illusion that I need in order to convince myself that writing about something is warranted – I feel, more and more often these days, that I am “translating” something. That I’m not the first to have arrived there. That the place I have come to at the very least, has been there before me.

So even that sense which is so intrinsic to inspiration, the sense of “first arrival”, breaks down into “translation”. The most “original” moment of all is a bit of a leveller. I mention this to emphasize that “who is the writer?” and “who is the translator?”, and “what constitutes translation?”, are questions worthy of the highest order of confusion.

A recent colloquium using the term “transnation” seemed to centre on the issue of translating African texts into European languages and vice versa. But for a South African writer, as in some other parts of the world – but especially in Africa – where more than one language is used in a given society, translation has an intra-national component as well. You might write keeping in mind that second-language speakers are also reading you, or third-language readers. At any social gathering in South Africa in the larger metropolises these days you are bound to find native speakers of three or more languages, with a European-language or two represented as well. People are translating one another constantly in the workplace, and at parties, and even in the bedroom, where the rules of personal attraction show scant regard for cultural dowry.

I wrote my first book of poetry in Afrikaans but decided to write the second in Afrikaans and English simultaneously, and having done so, found they were two entirely separate books. The original reason for the decision: My hypothetical Afrikaans audience did not mirror the linguistic make-up of my immediate social surroundings within the metropole that I chose to live in, least of all the sectors that I threw myself into. Afrikaans is widely understood in South Africa, but significantly, more widely misunderstood. Why write only for an “audience out there”, if some people closest to you have problems understanding what you are saying? I had to address that question for myself.

On the other hand, to switch to English entirely remains out of the question for me. Expediency cannot be equated with truthfulness nor for power of expression. My first allegiance is in fact, not to any audience but to my topic, the writing itself.

However, a writer writing in a “local language” might also have to ask himself: is there a likely audience in this language for what I want to say? Anywhere in the world where a writer opts to write in a provincial language, he or she has to ask that question.

And as much as the linguistic make-up of South Africa creates problems for literature, its problematic nature rules out some of the hazards – especially ethical hazards – of monolingual cultures. If, for instance, you have to write in two languages at the same time, you might think twice before you say something disingenuous. It is going to be easier not to confuse what others want to hear with what you really want to convey, or to confuse turn of phrase with substance – because often enough the lie of phrase-turning falls flat in the other language. Frequency of expression – which is the currency of political and cultural apparatchiks and the moguls of pulp – is less likely to be confused with acceptability.

If you look at South Africa, a strong check-and-balance effect had resulted from the magnetic field between the English and the Afrikaans press. This goes back to the years of apartheid, when the liberal English press challenged the government-supporting Afrikaans press. Difference, in our case that

essential difference of languages that shapes the South African landscape, can be used as an armor against delusion. It is a spanner in the works when it comes to propaganda – the propaganda of media, and of governments, of groups, of the monolithic and its ceaseless parrots. The obstacle of multiple languages is not necessarily a curse, nor even impractical.

For me, the most interesting thing about translation is not its increasing feats of “accuracy”, but the delightful margins of deviation, which give birth to new moons. Nowhere was this more evident than at the translation project at Poetry International in Rotterdam in 2000 where I had the honour of hearing translations of my poems into their own languages by various poets. There is a line in one of the poems which can be taken as an example: “Daar is skaars ’n pad wat iewers heen gaan,/ wat nie ook in die teenoorgestelde rigting loop nie.” Which I myself translated as: “There is hardly a road going anywhere/ that does not also lead in the opposite direction.” The Dutch poet Willem Van Toorn translated it as: “Er is nauwelijks een weg ergens heen/ die niet ook de andere kant opgaat.” His countryman Bernlef translated it as: “Hoe iets te weten als iedere heenweg tevens een terugweg is.”<sup>1</sup>

My conclusion from the translation project was: if there are so many ways of going in the opposite direction, there must be as many ways of going in the same direction. I think this feeling gives a hint of the charm and the mystery that surrounds translation.

On at least two occasions in recent months I have changed an original line of a poem to concur with an “error” by my Dutch translator, Robert Dorsman. I have had the odd privilege in the past three years since my poems were the subject of the translation project in Rotterdam, to see them published in Dutch magazines in translation long before an Afrikaans publication was on the horizon. Translation is a tortoise that sometimes overtakes the hare. So I have had the opportunity to “correct” some of my mistakes before the Afrikaans book gets published.

There is a belief in some quarters that poetry cannot be translated. In some cases this might be partly true, for instance in the case of Breyten Breytenbach, whose densely sonorous lines often rely for their meaning on a play of words and sound. This can be very difficult to render in translation. But on the whole, I take issue with that belief that poetry is “untranslatable”. Often enough one sees a poem come alive in a language that lacks the specific words for the concepts in the original. We wouldn’t be here, on this planet, being forced to talk to one another, and falling in love and out of love with one another, if it weren’t possible to change that view.

Certainly, some of the most important aspects of poetry are not only translatable, but prove their worth and substance by the very fact that they do succeed in translation.

The “transnation” colloquium, as far as I remember, did not so much discuss the practicality and advantages/disadvantages of writing in an own language or alternatively in a linking language, like French or English. We mainly probed the personal testimonies behind our choices. I can say that my reason for writing in Afrikaans has only partly been the question of personal identity. To start with, I come from a mixed linguistic parentage. Maybe there were other reasons of attachment, in which case these would not be unadulterated. I happen to have rather inimical feelings towards my own culture and its adherents. This was stronger for me and some of my peers in the eighties and late seventies, with military service in a doomed war hanging over our heads. Thus anger and resentment spawned by apartheid also had a kickback inside the former oppressor group.

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<sup>1</sup> Both citations courtesy of Poetry International 2000, Rotterdam.

The relationship with a mother – tongue is also sometimes a relationship of violation. Someone from the floor at the colloquium remarked that a new generation of Indian woman writers choose to write in English and disregard their mother – tongues. The relationship with one’s mother – tongue, I remarked, seems to entail more than just love. I told the story of a Serbian friend, who had ended up in South Africa to evade military conscription in Milosevic’s army. This friend once told me: “The hardships of life in exile and the missed opportunities all become bearable when weighed up against this one simple advantage: that I never again have to hear the wretched sounds of my mother language.” He had been a relatively successful writer back home.

Afrikaans is a provincial culture, with all the beauty and obscenity implied by that fact. Its most noticeable – and most denied – facet is that it is an inherently mixed culture, “coloured” and “white”. The entire culture is pinned onto this tragic divide, like tatters on a skeleton. It will take time to heal, if it ever will. Indeed, the culture of Afrikaans is a Siamese twin that got separated very badly, and should never have lived. For which half am I writing, then? Sometimes I feel like the shattered mother insisting on loving something unlovable because it is my inalienable right to do so.

It is a multifarious, albeit small culture, many of whose “white” members – even to this day – negate their own soul, the fact that the identity they breathe is fundamentally “creole”<sup>2</sup>, that this is one of the realities that have shaped Africa and being part of it is something to be proud of, not to run away from.

I have never been to the Malay islands myself, but a friend once came back and told me something significant. In some parts of those lands, if you close your eyes amid the hustle and bustle of a throng, it is as if you hear the gamut of Afrikaans sounds – the syncopation, the rhythms, the intonation, the squander of little bird noises. But without a shred of Dutch grammar. She would close her eyes and be home again in the dark, then open them and be in the blinding light of a completely foreign country. So while the grammar is derived from Dutch, the way the language dresses, the way it walks, comes from a different place. A place that is not white.

Afrikaans cooking is based on Malay precepts, to a large extent. And the music is a mix of boeremusiek, sailors’ songs (European in origin), ghoema (Cape creole) and Karoo shepherd ballads (of Khoisan origin). A musician once took out his guitar and showed a group of us the relationship between ghoema and boeremusiek. He played a line or so from both kinds of music. Now one might think that no two kinds of music can sound more different than these two, one spawned by white Afrikaans culture, the other by creole Afrikaans culture. But “Boeremusiek is exactly the same as ‘ghoema’” the muso said. “The same rhythm, just a beat or so slower.” One may counter by saying iron is the same substance as a crackling fire, just a couple of protons missing. But it became bewitchingly clear, in the way he played those notes, that this was the same music, the one just one beat slower than the other. And yet, they sounded so utterly different. “The change happened when the Boers acquired land,” said the musician. “They became fat in the arse and had to shed some beats. Thus boeremusiek was born.” Someone else proffered: “Maybe it was all boeremusiek to start with, but more or less that same time the coloured people had to resort to becoming thieves. As they listened to the jingling of loose change in their pockets while on the run, extra beats were inevitable.” Who knows? Two sides of the same story.

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<sup>2</sup> The Caribbean is home to this word, but because the words available in SA for this concept have been tainted by apartheid, the word “creole” is sometimes borrowed.

Love of Afrikaans? Yes and no. Beauty? The beauty of the Afrikaans language? I do find it a very beautiful language, yes. Such as it is, born without the left foot of the past perfect tense, deaf to the present participle's ringing tinnitus, and several verb conjugations that can't be counted on the fingers because they are contracted into a single thumb. Maybe these things don't matter because it is the wings of a language that count. Those immaculate, resplendent, flexing wings, I think, are what compel me to call this "my language". Two sets of wings, as I have intimated above, not only one – parachute and auxiliary parachute embracing, like the display of a peacock born out from history and air.

Embrace: some language historians say the traits of simplification in structures that created the Afrikaans language had to do with people of different languages urgently having to communicate without a linking language at their disposal, having to meet one another halfway in the dark. The Dutch naval officer and the Malay slave girl, say. Realising too late that the transaction had become love. Was bound to, so far away from home for both. And then rooted in that lightning, on the spot. Metamorphosized – in translation.

Thus – encoded in the very bone structure of Afrikaans – is the fact of translation.

It seems odd that anyone should ask someone else why they write in a particular language, but it gets done quite often in South Africa, which is eternally searching for its own centre. When asked, I have responded on occasion by saying I believe I should stand up for that part of the human imaginative landscape that seems entrusted to me, and protect its survival, in this case my own language and its biosphere. The whole of the planet's imaginative reach belongs to the whole of its inhabitants. But this, I've come to realize, is a rather synthetic position, despite a certain integrity.

Writers like Chenjerai Hove, or the South African Sello Duiker, who were also panelists at the colloquium, choose to write in a linking language, a language other than their mother tongue. Why? Maybe because reaching the potential reader, reaching the other, is more important to them than the future of the "Imaginative Whole", as conceived by someone like myself. Maybe bringing a speck of spirituality to people caught in a maelstrom of affliction is more urgent to them than the appearance of the human library fifty years hence. There is something altruistic, something very worthy of respect, about running the risk of diminishing one's own imaginative and verbal reach by writing in a language other than "your own" – for the sake of that Other.

And then again, there is that risk of expedience that I referred to above. Is one writing in a large language in order to be read? And are you still serving your own public?

So, in our various ways, we chase authenticity, and truthfulness, and practicality, despite ourselves. The writer in Africa writes in a situation of crisis by definition. The divisions between the writer and the people he/she writes for are numerous, and growing in some places. And therefore, my support for the choices made by my colleagues where those choices are not the same as my own, is unqualified. Africa is a large lizard, cut into many pieces, and every piece has to think on its feet.

It is an adventure to translate ourselves to one another. It is the very reason why anything gets written, ever. But do we as South Africans draw as much benefit from the exchange as we can? The answer is no. The culture of South Africa is on a different level of cohesion and development than that of Europe, and at present lacks the interest and means to utilise the possibilities of translating the other into itself.

For instance, I am convinced that the practice of poetry in South Africa is completely at a crossroads at present. Despite the abundance of grassroots metaphors and four-leaf clovers. The main reason – and I am not being reductionist –: South African poetry has had very limited exposure to the latter-day implications of French symbolism. And it is from the progeny of this sector of the landscape of world poetry that the most radical innovations have derived. Innovations that South African critics, largely, seem oblivious to. When I refer to “the practice of poetry”, I mean the collective functioning of the sphere, from the quality of publishers to the quality of reader, and in between, the quality of the poet. I am not saying that another Antjie Krog is unlikely for now. Good poets sometimes happen, regardless. But all the signs suggest publishers of poetry don’t read work outside their own borders. This is not to deny the good work done in difficult circumstances to keep an industry going.

The schism between local and international that I refer to has not shown up until recently because the rapport between South African poetry and the outside world has happened mostly on our terms. “We” were the ones being discovered by “them”. Let me offer an example. Probably the most gifted poet produced by South African soil was one Fernando Pessoa. There is little sign in the workings of the publishing industry in SA today that if this poet wrote in the present age that he would have been published or even noticed!

The Afrikaans writer/translator Uys Krige and the English-language poet/translator Roy Campbell did much to break down the isolation of South African poetry in the thirties and forties. Up to then South African poets had been mostly exposed to a narrow band of English and Dutch practitioners, certainly not to anything non Anglo-Saxon. Krige translated prodigiously from Spanish and French into Afrikaans and exposed the Afrikaans imagination to European poetry. Other writers like Brink later translated some novels from French. But none of these books have been freely available in the past decades. It takes one generation of closing off the hatches to bury the entirety that went before. And we have had several such generations now.

But, one might ask, is this the same language that produced that image juggler, that ambassador of modern imagination, that courier of Rimbaudism, Breytenbach? Well: he didn’t leave the country for no reason, vowing never to come back. It was after the woeful misreception, the ridicule by the public of his last play. In South Africa, he is still not fully absorbed or understood. And more often than not, the omission is willful. It is in the interest of conservative mindsets to ensure that Breytenbach is not absorbed fully into the Afrikaans, and thus into the South African, memory bank.

The years of the cultural boycott, and before that the decades of apartheid, have not done much to connect South Africa to postwar literary movements in Europe. At one stage of apartheid thousands of prominent titles of international literature were banned in SA. Unlike, say, a country Poland, we did not have a long written literary tradition before the apocalypse closed things down, onto which we could fall back. And as world poetry leaves behind carapace after carapace born from that mother tradition of symbolism, South African critics and readers seem more and more blissfully unaware of their own growing alienation. Of course we have certain homegrown traditions, you have domestic arrivals – but you have international departures too!

Do I hear someone muttering something about “Eurocentrism”? Well, if the road to appreciating a great African poet like Léopold Senghor leads through Europe, so be it. It is a road that goes in both directions.

Add to the above scenario the priorities of a post-revolutionary society, which do NOT include building new libraries – if anything, rather shutting them down and using the funds elsewhere – then the picture gets grim. It is a shaft of light, though, that the South African government sent a contingent of young filmmakers to the Cannes Festival in France in 2004. This type of initiative shows that they are not blind to the problems we face.

It should be abundantly clear from the above-mentioned instances how exposure to European influence could be beneficial for us. As the world turns, we have to measure ourselves against longer shadows than we have met before. Much can be gained from translations being made available both ways. For instance, Europeans can be reminded of the beauty and mystique of a society that is recreating itself. They have been there themselves, less than fifty years ago, and before that, at numerous junctures. Perhaps they are still there. And South Africans, in our exhilaration, and often in our despair, might learn about the ways in which we can survive this phase.

But there are warning lights: already some Afrikaans spokespeople are asking for minority rights for their culture. This in itself is not bad, there is much to support the idea of “minority rights”. But, without asking *whose* culture? What side of that Afrikaans divide? It is inconceivable to me that Afrikaans whites should reorganise themselves on the narrow basis of before, again broadcast themselves within the thin bandwidth of a “white, separate culture in Africa”. This would not be historically motivated in my opinion, and unfair to the archipelago of difference in its own midst, that difference which provides the electrical flow which is the real heart of this culture, the sheen in its wings, the iris that apartheid buried. It would be a sad day if this fundamentally creole culture were to again to organise itself without having translated itself to itself! Those old ideas must be laid to rest now, under autumnal flags, like sepia-coloured statesmen one wants to forget.

And yet I can agree with those who say the small cultures are in danger – those cultures not synonymous with a national identity, yet part of one. Those blank squares in the world’s babbling quilt, that keep reminding us of the necessity of mediation. The need for translation. May small languages live for ever – because translation is a *human* need, not only a practical one. And may we wake up and preserve these languages. But please, not again on preconceived, narrow, superimposed grounds. The possibility of this happening again in the case of Afrikaans looms large when one listens to certain people.

The power of literary translation is seen every year at Poetry International, Rotterdam when two translation projects get dedicated to two poets, from different parts of the world. The other poets who are reading that year decide which project they would like to be part of and then translate the particular poet into their own language, either from the original or from an intertext in a linking language. It is a format worthy of emulation. The University of the Orange Free State, South Africa, is about to do so in a translation project of their own. In the latter case four Afrikaans and four Dutch poets will translate one poem of each other. Thirty-two translations will result.

In the seventies four poets, Octavio Paz, Breyten Breytenbach, Jacques Roubaud and Charles Tomlinson did something similar. They wrote *rengas* – originally a Japanese form in which three or more poets contribute to the same poems. They did this in a cellar in New York. Each poet wrote a strophe in his own language, and the first poet would wrap up with the concluding strophe. The poems in their entirety would then get translated into all four participant languages, in this case Spanish, Afrikaans, French and English. This was a precursor to Poetry International’s idea of a translation workshop. The translation project is a format that could be implemented with great effectiveness in

Africa. The linking languages in the project could be French and English, and to a lesser extent Arabic. The poems would first get translated into these languages, en route to another home in a far-off African grammar. Imagine a steely Zulu poem by Kunene finding its voice in the whispers of Kikuyu. Or a Berber song, via Arabic and English, lamenting the hollow moon, being translated into the fisherman sounds of west coast Afrikaans. At the same time being translated into Swahili. And Yoruba. Maybe eight poets of different African languages, including French and English, could take part. Or various African poets could translate one prominent poet from the continent. The mirrors might undress before our eyes. Imagine this being done every year.

Much needs to be done sooner rather than later. Such practices as those described above are important to give true cultural meaning to the phrase “African Renaissance”.

The terms of American cultural occupation are translating themselves into cells everywhere in the world, at an alarming pace. Multiplicity, uniqueness of place, the sanctity of distance, the oldest clay treasures, all these things appear to be under siege at present. I ask forgiveness from the spirit of my own American grandmother for saying this. But she will understand, I hope. Because of her, I *am* more than one identity.

The translation of difference into common understanding could increase the bulwark against the avalanche of self-centered obliviousness currently sweeping the world. I don't think we have unleashed the full power of benevolent translation yet. If you can have flying carpets, you could have singing quilts. Let the quilt of the world sing in a thousand voices!

The globe will sound like an African market place.