

## Translating Marie Nimier's *Celui qui court derrière l'oiseau*

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*My first chance to translate Marie Nimier came when I was approached by a British publisher who had bought the rights to *Celui qui court derrière l'oiseau*. She asked my wife and me to provide a sample with a view to commissioning us to make a translation of the whole novel. We duly obliged, but then – a professional hazard, this – the publisher encountered financial difficulties, and was unable to offer us a contract, so the book remains untranslated to this day. But the following passage survives, and may be of interest to Nimier scholars.*

“I can't stand brackets. Dashes, they're all right, you can just use one, but brackets... These little bits of sentences, words clinging like leeches on to the main body, that closed, confined, hermetically sealed object - my lips are trembling, I have got a lump in my throat, I can't breathe: someone's moving behind the curtain. I press the bell again but no-one comes. Only the woman beside me sympathizes; she jokes reassuringly: 'You could die here, no-one would notice!'

I lean forward, I want to get up and go. This is what I'll have to say: 'Excuse me, for reasons beyond my control, I must get out. Really must. Absolutely have to. It's a matter of life and death.'

There's no reply, there must be something wrong in the cabin. The stewardesses don't normally leave us like this, in the void. All these strapped bellies, all these lives in danger in such a tiny space... The steward comes at last, slows down but doesn't stop. I make to call him, the brackets close again, my mouth won't open although I'm making a massive effort, my jaws ache - the steward moves on, unconcerned. If I get out of here alive that stringy beanpole with the lumpy skin won't hear the last of this, I'll complain to the airline about his failure to help someone in distress, the best he can come up with is to hand out towelettes.

I'm being stupid, calm down, I must calm down. They'll soon serve lunch. I haven't had anything to eat for twenty-four hours. My mother made me some meat balls, but I left them in the airport bus. Bustle of trays, up there, some passengers move about, they're going to the toilets. Off in the loo. Unload before landing, a lot of good it'll do them, they'll crash with empty bowels and a light heart. A strong smell of cologne. Sea food, on the patio. I think of my father, the way he shells crabs. He grasps them in both hands. Why didn't he stop me leaving? I'm thirty and I'm a child. I'm thirty and I need a father. The woman next to me holds out a sickbag with the company logo. I notice her legs, her knees encased in support tights - an experienced air traveller. The lycra moulds her long legs, if only she could take them off, show some flesh, distract me. Instead she smiles and gets up. Why is she in turn abandoning me?

The journey had started rather well. Seeing me knocking back sleeping pills, my neighbour had told me not to worry, she wouldn't stop me sleeping. Oh! no. She understood the problem, she didn't suffer from insomnia herself, fortunately, but one of her friends, in fact *her* friend...

As she stressed *her* she gave me a knowing look.

‘You’re going to sleep?’ she continued.

‘I’m going to try.’

‘Well, I’ll be able to tell my friend that I slept with you because I’m going to sleep as well!’

For a few moments we were silent, without stirring. I would have preferred this girl to go on talking; I liked her voice, it reminded me of Magdalena’s. I tried to relax, but the more I tried the more I felt imprisoned, like a raw carrot in a food processor. Someone only needed to switch it on for us to end up grated, torn to shreds by the blades. Just at that moment my companion pressed the button which regulated her seat. I saw her tip back and for a second I thought she’d lost her balance. In a protective gesture I put my hand on her thighs to stop her tipping upside down. She took my hand in hers and replaced it gently on the arm of the seat. I felt myself blush, yes - how could she have imagined? I can see myself now, pale faced with scarlet ears.

The indicator light is still winking, and that stewardess is still not coming... The sick bag is still open, on the table in front of me. Take refuge, plunge head first into it, certain death but quick and certain. My neighbour has left an equestrian magazine on her seat, the horse on the cover has its nostrils raised to the sky, there isn’t enough air, that’s it, we need more air. The masks will drop down soon, like bats, and hang in front of our faces. Through some miracle, the stewardess is now standing in the aisle, hands on hips, people on the other side are drinking beer, beer at 11 a.m. because it’s free. Excuse me, I say, I must, I absolutely have to, my voice falters the more she smiles, ‘Excuse me’, and then I take the plunge:

‘I must get out. I’ve forgotten...’

A moment of calm. Get out. The words have been uttered. The stewardess looks at me strangely. She’s no longer smiling and yet the trace of a smile remains.

‘You heard’, I shout, ‘I must get out’.

‘But, sir, we’re flying at 18,000 feet!’

‘To hell with that, I tell you I must get out, it’s a matter of life and death.’

Her voice, the stewardess’s, is so shrill, her painted lips now tight: I realize I have no choice. I can’t bear the idea, I’m seized with a fit of coughing, the only way out in this place that’s too hot, too small and too high up. The stewardess pats me gently on the back, her little finger cocked, her other hand laid on my chest. Her softness overwhelms me. Everyone’s looking at us. I feel more and more oppressed, that’s all I need, all these eyes fixed on me, this bank of pupils, my forehead clammy, then a sentence surfaces from my memory: *Benzodiazepines calm anxiety*. It comes back again, it was the doctor I consulted in Salène who said it:

‘Benzodiazepines calm anxiety, without precluding homeopathic treatment.’

Yes, doctor, everything, doctor, pills, relaxation, needles in the scalp, the course on fear management, and nothing works, if you want to stretch your legs out in the aisle you have to accept you’ll get people treading on your toes. Desire, obligation, acquiescence, human nature’s hopeless trilogy - if I can’t get out perhaps I could take some tranquillisers, only a few simple steps to take, unzipping my toilet bag, finding the cardboard box, taking out the blister-pack and pressing the plastic bubble with my thumb, a small sharp sound, like a dead twig, a vertebra snapping, to get out the capsule, two perhaps, but the bag is in the suitcase and the suitcase went through check-in.

‘I want to go down into the hold!’

The air hostess talks of calming down, her right arm waving in the air, she gets excited, the epaulette of her jacket rises, what's happening, she's calling for help, why such a worried expression? The doctor advised me not to take the drugs with me into the cabin and like an idiot I followed his advice. In a moment of panic one of his patients had swallowed a whole box of sedatives, they'd had to improvise a stomach pump in mid-air, he had never forgotten it... I am given a glass and two tiny pills, just as an alarm sounds, extinguish all cigarettes, remain seated, fasten seat belts. I drink a mouthful of water, the liquid seems very cold, only just bearable. I study the safety instructions one last time. In an emergency, remove high heeled shoes before sliding down the chute. The lifejacket is under the seat, with its straps and its whistle, dare I, can I, the captain's voice confirms my fears: we are entering a zone of turbulence. Follow the fluorescent signs down the aisle - but which ones, nothing is illuminated and the fuselage shakes, a hole, a big hole that leaves me empty. Get out, out, out, get out...

The alarm stops, the passengers calm down, the nape of my neck relaxes. The stewardess moves away. I can hear her giving her diagnosis. Claustrophobia, she says. Her colleague turns to look at me, with a worried expression; these five syllables do not reassure her.

'I'm not claustrophobic, it's the plane that's going to crash!'

My voice stops in my throat. Did she hear me? She doesn't reply. Luckily my neighbour comes back, she's smiling. Her hair is as blond as mine is dark, an artificial blond, corn-coloured tone with an impish fringe, brushed into a tuft. She is laughing to herself now, wants to tell me something, can't keep it to herself any more, bursts out:

'You should go to the toilet, that'll take your mind off it. There's a very amusing graffiti.'

'Oh?'

I make an effort to join in the conversation, this girl is my salvation, she'll help me put the mask over my face.

'Near the paper holder there's something written on the wall: "If you want to play Toilet Tennis, look right".'

She speaks English with an odd accent, I wonder where it comes from.

'So', she continues, 'I look to the right and what do I see: "If you want to play Toilet Tennis, look left"'. I look left and the graffiti on the right catches my eye and invites me to look to the left, and so on...

My neighbour's face bounces from one side to the other, she clicks her tongue. I'm not sure I've understood. Restrained smile, embarrassed grin. She starts to fill in her landing card. Her fountain pen is leaking, so her fingers are stained. The ink takes over her skin, it spreads along the crevices. Valérie Toss. Miss Toss, nationality French, place of birth Alexandria, how strange, we were born the same year. Valérie straightens up, our eyes meet. Hers are a kind of speckled green. She's got her eye on my card too, stuck in the net just in front of me. Can she manage to read the name? I used to think it ridiculous, I wanted to be called Gilles or Fred, or even Christophe, but by now I'm proud of it and wouldn't change it for anything.

I'm called Mikis, after my mother's father.

Michaïl Zarkos, nicknamed Mikis. My grandfather was a sponge fisher. He came to France at the turn of the century, looking for work. He settled in Salène, not far from the port. At that time there was a labour shortage in the salt marshes. As time went on, he had a family, lamb and baked potatoes on Sundays, lentil soup on Fridays. Since then everyone has found a place in the local industry, no surprises in

Salène, there's only one thing they produce, salt. I should say 'cultivate', even though the size of the business and the techniques they use are more industrial than agricultural. Eight hundred hectares of marsh. Almost a million tonnes of salt gathered each year by enormous machines and a third of it ends up on the icy roads in winter. Try explaining that to someone who lives in the Cyclades...

'I'm not dropping you', Valérie Toss murmurs, 'I'm discreet. You seem to be perking up.'

'Perking up'? The expression sends a shiver down my spine. I look out of the window and the lump in my throat's come back. My parents always say that Greeks are not afraid of dying because they name their children after their grandparents. But I was born in France and I'm afraid. I think of my elder brother, the one I never knew. Each year my mother makes a pilgrimage to the place on the river where the accident occurred. There was a café with a dance floor there where the whole of Salène went on Sundays. The banks were muddy and it seems my brother slipped. He was six years old and was also called Mikis. You could say I replaced him. But who will take my place in the salt pans? Who will check the water's ebb and flow? We're flying over a built-up area, soon we'll land. The captain says we're beginning our descent. He doesn't want to alarm us. Why that sudden noise? My head, it's my head which is filling with mud...

'Cheer up! It's nearly over.'

Nearly over, even my neighbour thinks so, I would rather have crashed over water - crash into water, what a strange mixture, yes, I'd have preferred to drown like my brother, but here, over a town... The best I can hope for is that my parachute will get snagged in the power lines, how is it that sparrows don't get electrocuted? 'It's over, all over', Valérie Toss keeps saying; she senses that things aren't going well. The wings retract, my muscles relax, I shout and shout again, all the available uniforms in the cabin gather around me, why are the other passengers making no noise? Their silence is obscene. Do they think they're safe? They're going to go through it, poor charred puppets, we're all going to go through it, only the babies seem to realize. I'm screaming along with them, I'm hot, I drift off, I can hear our voices saturating the ether. Liquid flows down my legs, a hand has slipped into mine, a soft, reassuring hand, I can't hold out any longer, life is slipping away from me...

My neighbour has disappeared, no sign of her luggage, nor of the horse or the newspapers. A man with enormous feet is picking up a beer can that has rolled under a seat. He shakes it over his mouth, a few drops fall, he presses his lips to the metal to extract the last drop. My ears unblock, why am I being lifted up? I am floating in the aisle. I'm flying in the plane. I know we've arrived. At last I can close my eyes.

I should never have taken the plane.

I would never have taken it had it not been for the heat wave in Salène last summer. It was a Friday and I couldn't get to sleep. I'd got up at about eleven o'clock at night. I'd driven along the river for some time before pulling up in front of La Vie Sauvage - known as Jo's place to the regulars from the salt marshes. The restaurant's specialities were seafood and fish grilled on a bed of fennel, served with chick pea pancakes, the only place in the area to combine the two. All the tourist guides listed it as 'a picturesque place to eat, not to be missed'. Customers paid for the lack of frills. You ate on wooden trestles with no table cloth, but there was music along with the owner's foghorn of a voice if he'd had enough to drink. The only

concessions made in this rough-and-ready world were cloth napkins and a terrace lit by strings of multicoloured bulbs.

I stayed in the restaurant bar until it closed. The owner offered me a last drink on the house. I wasn't surprised when the waitress asked if I could take her back to Salène - her moped had broken down and she didn't know how to get home. When I agreed she introduced herself. Magda, Magdalena. She'd been working at the Vie Sauvage since the beginning of the month. Her black dress buttoned up the back. It wasn't really short, you couldn't see through it, it didn't have a plunging neckline. It would have been perfectly decent but for the material which gaped at each button, revealing glimpses of skin.

Magda climbed into the passenger seat. She said nothing for the first half of the journey and when she did open her mouth it was to kiss me. A van was coming towards us, the headlights dazzled me for a moment and I thought we were going to crash head-on. I wrenched the steering wheel round.

The car came to a halt. We were in the middle of nowhere, a few miles from the salt marshes.

I wanted to get out, I felt stifled. Magda helped me undo my seatbelt. I wanted to push my seat back, there wasn't enough space, not enough room for both of us, but she didn't leave me time. Who did she think she was? She went straight ahead and took me. The whole thing was over in five minutes. I was overwhelmed by pleasure I didn't want to admit to, pleasure I hadn't sought. I pushed Magdalena away. Didn't she realize that she'd nearly caused an accident? It was our first row. The passenger door slammed violently.

I saw her move away, alone in the night, her dress floating around her lithe body. She was carrying her sandals in her hand. That's it, I thought, it's over, but nonetheless I started the engine and followed her. She stepped back on to the grass verge. I hooted the horn - I go red at the thought. By way of reply Magda plunged into the field of sunflowers by the roadside. I had only one idea in my head, one wish, to place my fingers in the gaps in her dress, between the buttons, and to pull and pull so that Magda could breathe...

I didn't run after her. I didn't take her in my arms. I masturbated quickly, very quickly, just like that, as I watched her disappearing among the tall stems until I could hardly make her out, I came just when she was a mere nothing, a hazy shadow, a memory.

I told no-one about that evening. What could I say, how could I describe it? I could imagine the reactions of my colleagues at the Salt Works. A bit of all right, that new waitress at La Vie Sauvage, a terrific bird, and an easy lay, too. What's her name again?

To my great surprise Magdalena didn't try to see me again. At first I was pleased; I wasn't going to get involved with a girl who leapt on the first man she saw, even - above all - if I fancied her. What did I not dream up to help me forget her? Magda was a public danger. A randy lady.

Days passed, the nights stretched out. My friends all thought I looked tired. I no longer laughed as I once did, they said, I was apathetic, always miles away. My parents who lived a few doors down from me asked if I was not feeling ill. They were worried to see me like that, with bags under my eyes, as if I had a temperature. My mother even went so far as to dream up *sporadic* itching - where on earth had she got

the word from? - to make me take her to the doctor's and get him to check me over instead of her.

'Oh, whilst we're at it, you could just take a look at my son...'

My mother has never learnt to drive, preferring to rely on me for a lift when she needs it. I like these small obligations that bind us together. The doctor listened to my chest, and since I went along with my mother's stratagem, he felt my abdomen, tested my reflexes and carried out other checks in a very professional way before concluding that I seemed in perfect health.

Perfect health? I was cross that he hadn't taken my mother's worries too seriously, I badly needed sympathy. I should have liked him to find me an atypical virus, something lacking, anything at least that I could use as a screen. All he did was prescribe a sleeping pill. I had slept badly since I met Magdalena and was exhausted.

I left the doctor's feeling even more dejected than before, on the arm of a mother who now miraculously no longer had the slightest urge to scratch, even sporadically. Yes, I was fine, thank you, and yet the next day when I made a mistake in the programming of the opening of the sluices, I had to admit that things could not be worse. I was summoned to the technical director's office. It was the second time that week that I had endangered the balance of the salt beds. The error was unforgivable. The same evening I decided to go back to the restaurant.

Magdalena was there, radiant. She kissed me as if she'd met an old friend and without my asking she brought a bottle of white wine and a dish of those little shellfish you find in the sand at the water's edge. The boss was away and the place was emptying down, just a jolly couple, Austrians, I think, and at another table some lethargic people from Marseilles. Magda crouched by my side. I offered her a chair but she preferred to sit that way, on her heels. Ready to go. Ready to stretch out. I asked how she had fetched up at Jo's place. I gathered from her smile that it was not for me to ask questions. The replies would come of their own accord, or not at all. Nonetheless I heard that evening she had spent her childhood at the edge of the Black Forest. From those early years she had retained an accent that seemed rather like a speech defect. She stumbled over words and between sentences left long silences during which she watched me without blinking. I found it difficult and even painful to keep looking her in the eye.

Two weeks had passed since our first meeting. Magdalena complained at not seeing me earlier. Was she making fun of me? It would have been easy for her to find me if she'd wanted to; the centre of Salène is no bigger than a pocket handkerchief and everyone there knows everyone else. She repeated her question. Why hadn't I got in touch?

I invented an excuse to do with my job. Since I was in charge of the water levels, I'd had a lot of work because of the torrential rain that had hit the region the day after we met. Coincidence? By flooding the pans the rain threatened the final part of the crystallization process.

'Crystallization?', repeated Magdalena.

I pretended not to hear and continued my account. One had to operate the sluices constantly to free the salt beds of all that unwanted fresh water.

'Fresh and unwanted', she repeated.

What an infuriating girl! Several cracks still needed repairing. Two teams had been working night and day since the beginning of the storms.

Magda was now listening to me in silence. When I stopped talking she lowered her eyes and I was able to take my time looking at her. A triangular face, long curling lashes, a fine golden skin...

‘Is it true that people in the marshes pray to Saint Médard?’ she asked suddenly.

Magdalena had a very romantic notion of salt production. I disappointed her when I said that the management of water movements was computer-controlled and the salt beds were levelled by laser. I enjoyed needling her. She replied that to her mind it wasn’t computers that allowed the water to evaporate but rather the sun and the wind.

‘As in the last century and the one before that, some things don’t change...’

She didn’t finish her sentence, the people from Marseille were calling her over. The smile she gave the young man who was asking for the bill with a wave of his hand made me want to leave and slam the door behind me. This Magda girl had no sense of moderation. Why was she thanking him now? When she came back to my table I made no bones about what I thought of her attitude. She called me an idiot and started laughing. I nearly hit her. I felt really comfortable with her.

I had never met anyone like Magdalena. My girlfriends were normally shy, even withdrawn. I hadn’t changed much since I was seventeen. I wore the same shirts, a little too big for me: I hated close-fitting things, they made me feel as if I were caught in a trap. For the same reason I never bought clothes that had to be pulled on over the head; I preferred cardigans to sweaters, I found them easier to handle, less enveloping. No-one had ever seen me in a polo-neck, although to be honest I had once tried one on in secret, out of defiance, but my body would not put up with it. After a few minutes I had to take it off. Nevertheless girls liked what they called my style, my look. I never understood what they meant precisely, my excessively thick hair, my sleeves always rolled up, or my eyebrows that never stayed put. I was the first to be surprised by my numerous conquests, for they were indeed numerous, although not concurrent. I wasn’t playing a game, I was frank and eager for what I thought of as being life itself, the soft lips which brushed against mine, the hands I held, the skin I puckered. I made no promises. Because I never lied, I thought I was honest. The way girls kept falling in love embarrassed me a bit, their declarations made me blush, and only my mother’s undying attachment seemed natural to me. She complained that I was always with a new girlfriend - really, at your age you should be making your mind up - but she made sure the status quo continued. When one girl hung around me for a little too long, my mother would manage to get rid of her with a devastating remark: no-one was her match when it came of sniffing out concealed flaws.

Was it out of naivety or an attempt to console the inconsolable? In spite of my mother’s attitude, I kept bringing my girlfriends home. Once they and I had split up my parents took them under their wing. These caring sisters filled the void that my elder brother had left.

I was haunted by the image of his small wet body on the bank, and when I was kissing girls I always had to push them away a bit so as not to feel suffocated. Magdalena was the first woman I managed to kiss for any length of time without having to come up for air.”

*Celui qui court derrière l’oiseau (Running Behind the Bird)*, pp 11-29 (translated by John and Beryl Fletcher)

I have not looked at this text for several years, but in rereading it I am struck by how smoothly it flows. No credit to the translators: rather to the author, who writes such limpid prose. Towards the end of the first section (there are no chapters as such in the novel) the narrator is troubled by the expression *reprendre du poil de la bête*. The phrase is of English origin: it was once popularly supposed that if you were bitten by a rabid dog, a hair of the animal would cure you. In French the meaning changed a lot over the centuries and is usually translated nowadays as “to regain strength, to perk up”. In English the meaning has remained closer to the original; “a hair of the dog” refers humorously to a supposed - albeit illusory - cure for hangover, a stiff drink. After much hesitation, we decided not to attempt to translate literally what Valérie Toss says, since to do so would introduce an element absent from the original, namely the whiff of spirits.

When some years later Jeanne-Sarah de Larquier approached me to translate other Nimier texts for academic journals she was editing, I found the experience of having worked on *Celui qui court derrière l’oiseau* helpful.

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