

Commentary on the poem:

The poem "Speaking Promiscuously: Loosely, after Mansour" came to be as a part of a translation exercise assigned to students in a French-African Novel course. The course is housed within the foreign language department, but taught in English. As we talked about our texts as translations it became clear that the students in this 200-level course had never considered their translated texts as versions of the text, rather than "the text." So I found a short, odd poem (Mansour's "Les vices des hommes"), and sent them on their merry way with some online translation tools, French-English dictionaries, a few email addresses of native French-speaking students, and not much more. When we regrouped to discuss, it was clear that the students still assumed their was a "correct" translation, and were unwilling to experiment.

So, I tried to write the oddest translation I could, but demonstrating key elements. I wanted them to engage with diction (and so my first section plays with word choice within a particular context), interpretation (so my second section is meta-meta, with allusions yet little resemblance to the text), and question the very notion of "equivalence" (so my third section simply refuses to make many choices).

Each section grows, refusing to be confined to the original text's form. Finally, the references to Steiner & online contexts attempts to escape even the page, albeit unsuccessfully. The poem's surreality resists any kind of coherence, which is what I like: sex to me is not sex to the reader; eating may be "eating" or simply eating. Between "men" and "mankind" is a large gap, or perhaps no gap at all.

The students remained flummoxed.