

Graffiti in Translation

by

Laura Elizabeth Hess
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Introduction:

Léon-Gontran Damas and *Graffiti*

I.

Léon-Gontran Damas was one of the founding fathers of the negritude movement, a cultural movement of the black francophone diaspora that addressed racial issues, affirmed the value of black arts and culture, and criticized European colonialism. He grew up in a bourgeois household in French Guiana and completed a colonial French education, which gave him a new perspective for understanding the consequences of colonialism in his homeland. While studying in Paris, he met Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, the other two founding fathers of the negritude movement. The three friends influenced each other, and all eventually took political office, which makes it surprising that Césaire and Senghor have since eclipsed Damas. His relative obscurity is mainly due to his career in academia rather than politics in later life – away from the public eye – and to negative reviews from critics regarding his later poetry. Damas' work has been undervalued because he departs from those critics' narrow expectations of what his work should be. We shall examine Damas' background and career, and the impact of *Graffiti*, to understand why it is worthy of study by a wider, Anglophone audience.

Damas had a difficult relationship with his childhood. His family was financially stable, but like most of the middle-class, bi-racial population in early

twentieth-century Guiana, they raised him to act like a white, French child and repress his blackness. Bridget Jones writes of Damas' childhood, "He has expressed very forcibly his pain at being moulded into an *assimilé* by his upbringing as a child; the constant pressure from home and school to speak, behave and if possible think like a white Frenchman" (Jones 31). This confusion and frustration would later manifest itself in his poetry. Many critics cite the poem, "Hoquet," from *Pigments*, as an example of this childhood pain. In "Hoquet" (Hiccup), the speaker's parents admonish him for forgetting his French table manners, for not speaking French enough, for associating with an unbaptized child, for playing the banjo instead of the violin, and for generally acting "too black." It culminates with two particularly harsh lines, presumably delivered by the speaker's mother: "les *mulâtres* ne font pas ça / laissez donc ça aux *nègres*"¹ (*Pigments* 38). In *Graffiti*, we find an evolution of this anger in "Il me souvient encore." There, Damas pokes fun at the very establishments that troubled him as a child, by reimagining the Catholic communion through a sexualized lens.

As Damas grew up, he was exposed to new spheres of French-influenced society in other places. He attended secondary school on Martinique at the Lycée Schoelcher, where he first met Aimé Césaire. In addition to meeting Césaire, whom he called his "best friend" in a 1971 interview ("La Négritude en question" 13), Damas was introduced to the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, who would become some of his biggest influences:

¹ "*mulattoes* don't do that / leave that to the *blacks*"

As their teacher of English, they had a young Martinican poet, Gilbert Gratiant who initiated them to black American poetry. It was at the Lycée Schoelcher, mostly attended by white Martinicans, that Damas first became aware of racial difference as a result of their humiliating remarks and attitude although, as a Guyanese, he was more easily admitted among the so called “béké”² circle and had friends among them when black Martinicans were rarely introduced to their society.³ (Racine, “Leon Gontran Damas and Africa” 49)

While Damas was finally exposed to black poetry that resonated with him, at the same time, he experienced the profound racial inequality inherent to the racially divided social systems imposed by imperial France. As a bi-racial boy, Damas found himself privileged over his peers who were considered completely black; yet colonial administrators saw all who were not exclusively white simply as a black “other.”

Damas moved to Paris to continue his studies, thereby completing his education in the colonial model, whose goal was to place him among the ranks of “les évolués” – the term for the fully Europeanized, white-collar élite of the French colonies. There, his experiences of racial inequality unfortunately

² The term “békés” refers to the white descendants of the original slave owners who arrived in the Caribbean generations before to grow and sell sugar cane, and who continue to control a large part of Martinique’s economy today.

³ For more information on racial terminology and classification in Martinique, see Isabelle Michelot’s article “Du Neg nwe au Beke Goyave, le langage de la couleur de la peau en Martinique.”

became more pronounced, and the frustration he felt about this became a common theme in his poetry. However, in Paris, he encountered other young, black university students, such as Césaire and Senghor, and became part of an “elect,” similar to the concept of the “talented tenth” in America (See Rabaka). Through the journal, *L'Étudiant Noir*, Damas united with these students to form a larger black, Parisian community, including members from several different black, French colonies. He spoke about this in a 1971 interview with *Jeune Afrique*:

[W]hile studying law and anthropology in Paris, I came to know Léopold Sédar Senghor and almost all the present African leaders. Starting with a journal called *L'Étudiant Noir*, we had a unified movement going in a few years. In fact, by virtue of the rampant colonial system, there was ready opposition of the Martiniquan to the Guadeloupean, to the Guyanese or to the African. People tried to make us believe, for example that West Indians were superior to Africans. *L'Étudiant Noir* saw itself as both a fighting and as a unifying body. (“La Négritude en question” 13)

So, the goal of *L'Étudiant Noir* was both political and cultural. By founding *L'Étudiant Noir*, the three fathers of negritude had the opportunity to work with its “main collaborators, Aristide Maugée, Gilbert Gratiant, Léonard Sainville, Birago Diop, Charpentier, etc” (Damas, “From René Maran to Négritude” 22). The black community in Paris was small, so it was not difficult for everyone interested in this cause to meet often and exchange ideas.

As one might expect, Damas' new identity as a politically active writer was a far cry from the obedient French citizen he was raised to be. Bridget Jones describes Damas' cultural coming of age in Paris: "Once a student he rebelled and affirmed himself a 'poète nègre,' trying also by contacts and studies in ethnology to develop understanding of the African within him" (Jones 31). The works of the German ethnographer Leo Frobenius were of particular fascination to Damas. Frobenius "not only accused the Europeans of egocentric historical thinking, but directly and indirectly attacked colonial imperialism" (Zwernemann 4). His works introduced Damas to the idea of an African "essence," a concept that would become very important to the future ideology of negritude. Damas parents, however, were not pleased with their son's academic change of heart. In fact, "When Damas' parents happened to learn about his interest in 'exotic languages and studies' rather than law, they cut off his allowance" (Racine, "Leon Gontran Damas and Africa" 51). Fortunately, his Paris network stepped in to help: "His friends, wishing to rescue him, wrote to Felix Eboué, a Guyanese Civil Servant, then Governor of Martinique, to petition for a scholarship in his favor, which, in time, was granted" (Racine, "Leon Gontran Damas and Africa" 51).

Damas continued to push boundaries with the 1937 publication of his overtly political *Pigments*, the first published collection of negritude poetry. This slim volume had a global impact, which worried the French government:

Pigments had been seized and banned ‘pour atteinte à la sûreté de l’Etat’⁴ by the French authorities in 1939...Even in the Baoulé translation, Damas’ poems were stirring youth in Ivory Coast and they were refusing to be mobilized. This surely was proof that the poems had a force that was more than purely literary. (Warner, “Leon Damas and His Critics” 6)

The policemen who searched Damas’ home explained to him that the Ivorians had “begun to sing these poems all over the country” as a rallying cry for their protests against the ruling government (“La Négritude en question” 14).

Pigments didn’t only inspire political resistance; it also inspired the literature of his fellows and successors in the negritude movement. *Pigments* was the first collection published by any of the three fathers of negritude, and it became the literary foundation of the movement. In a 1972 interview with *Manna*, Damas explained the impact of *Pigments*:

[M]y work constitutes an important message, and *Pigments* has been not only the first book of its generation, *Pigments* has been the manifesto of the négritude movement...all the poets who came after *Pigments* were obliged to use material from the poems that comprise it. All the themes of *Pigments*, and the ideas in it have been taken, and from that period till now I see nothing new. (Warner, “Négritude Revisited” 24)

⁴ as a violation of national security

It did not take generations for *Pigments*' significance to sink in; rather Damas' contemporaries took inspiration from it immediately to create their own work. Césaire told Damas that his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, one of the most well-known poems of the movement, drew directly from precedents established in *Pigments* ("La Négritude en Question" 14). As the founding text of the Negritude movement, *Pigments* set the standard for what a Negritude text should be. It affirmed that black thought, black art, and black voices should never assimilate to the European academic establishment. It took inspiration from the popular surrealist style, as the best style to express the frustration with the colonizer and the pain of the colonized. *Pigments* quickly established Damas as a leading figure among his peers in the negritude movement.

But that critical success did not last. Damas' later work was not nearly as well received as his first collection of poetry, yet Césaire and Senghor's popularity continued to grow with time. *Pigments* set such a powerful precedent for Damas that most critics were unable to see beyond that persona of the angry revolutionary. Warner writes:

[W]hen Damas published other poems, sentimentality was accorded a greater share of his attention. Unfortunately, critical acclaim, so accustomed to a Damas that was anything else but sentimental, persisted in seeing everything Damas wrote as a sequel to *Pigments*, which was naturally not always the case. (Warner, "Leon Damas and His Critics" 4)

Damas, like artists of any medium, continued to evolve after his first big success, but the critics' perceptions of what his work should be did not evolve along with him. Most understood him only through the trope of the "angry black man," reading his work as primitivistic poetry. Both Césaire and Senghor continued to explicitly address race and politics in their later work (See Davis 126-62), and consequently remained in the critics' favor.

Another reason that Césaire and Senghor have eclipsed Damas is because they have been in the public eye much more than him. Césaire began his political career in 1945 when he was elected mayor of Martinique's capital, Fort-de-France, and as Martinique's deputy to the Assemblée Nationale, the lower house of the French parliament. By 1988, he had served as president of the Conseil Régional de la Martinique for five years. As his political career progressed, his literary work took on a distinctly historical and political focus. He is now remembered by anyone who visits or departs from his homeland, as Martinique's main airport bears his name. Senghor had an even more illustrious career. He also began as a deputy to the Assemblée Nationale in 1945, and eventually served as the Republic of Senegal's first president in 1960. He survived a coup d'état, an assassination attempt, and a twelve-year political imprisonment. His legacy is assured, as he was elected to the Académie Française in 1983.

Damas was also elected to the Assemblée Nationale, though not until 1948, three years later than Césaire and Senghor. His political career never took off, as he lost his seat in 1951, less than a year before *Graffiti* was published (Racine,

Léon-Gontran Damas : l'homme et l'œuvre 34-9). Instead, Damas had a short-lived career in radio, lasting only from 1958 to 1962, when he was fired, most likely for political reasons (Racine, *Léon-Gontran Damas : l'homme et l'œuvre* 40). His true calling seemed to be academia, which he continued to pursue well into old age. He taught at multiple American universities, most notably Howard University, in Washington, D.C. (Racine, *Léon-Gontran Damas : l'homme et l'œuvre* 45-50).

Professors are featured in mass media far less than politicians, so unlike Césaire and Senghor, Damas spent his later life away from public view. Not only did he take a more private career path, but he did so in the United States, rather than in France or in Guiana, his homeland. Damas' literary career did not benefit from political publicity, and it suffered from critical disapproval. Because of this, his work has not been studied as much as that of the other two founders of the negritude movement.

II.

Graffiti, Damas' first collection of poetry published after *Pigments*, is more a collection of love poems than a call to revolution. Critics who expected it to be a continuation of *Pigments'* straightforward, racially-charged anger were necessarily disappointed. However, insisting that a black man is a lover, not just a fighter, was a revolutionary idea at that time. Merle Hodge explains Damas' poetic shift; "His next published book of poetry is *Graffiti*, which at first disconcerts because it is all but racially anonymous – the burning

preoccupations of *Pigments* are totally absent” (Hodge 119-20). Hodge explains that Damas became more accessible by writing about his own emotional problems. He has already “proclaim[ed] with all his might his racial identification and solidarity” (Hodge 120), so with that in mind, he began to write about his experience as a man. However, this idea of writing as “first and foremost a man” (Hodge 120) is highly problematic. Langston Hughes illustrates this difficulty in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, ‘I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,’ meaning, I believe, ‘I want to write like a white poet’; meaning subconsciously, ‘I would like to be a white poet’; meaning behind that, ‘I would like to be white.’ (Hughes 1)

There is pressure on Damas to find the perfect balance between writing to express himself, and writing as a spokesperson for a group. In writing about the personal, Damas focuses less on the general problems facing anyone with his racial background.

While on the surface it may seem that Damas has abandoned his racial identity in *Graffiti*, the opposite is in fact true. In an interview, Damas paradoxically said, “Now thanks to Senghor, Césaire and myself, we stayed the way we were in the beginning and all our books, after the first, were explanations of the first” (Warner, “Négritude Revisited” 24). *Graffiti* is Damas’ chance to build on what he already wrote in *Pigments*. He does not need to repeat the same themes that he already discussed, but he can reiterate them in a

new context. If, rather than dismissing *Graffiti* out of hand, we look a little deeper, themes of racial alienation are obvious. In her analysis, Kirsten Halling reads *Graffiti* as “a logical sequel to *Pigments*” (Halling 45). She writes:

In *Pigments*, the themes of self-deception and personal weakness are a source of poetic anger. In *Graffiti*, these themes reappear in sexual imagery (“Sur le sein” ‘On the breast’), graphically illustrating the connection between the seduction of the colonizer and the temptations of the flesh. (Halling 45)

Halling’s reading seems to be a variation on the allegorical reading, which figures the metropole as the unattainable beloved and the colonized as the broken-hearted lover. Though *Graffiti* may not quite fit her reading of “the collective experience of the colonized minority...within the metaphorical context of a broken heart” (Halling 30), Damas does use heartbreak to continue to express his own personal experiences as an oppressed minority. There are some explicit references to Damas’ race, such as “ma fugue afro-amérindienne”⁵ in “Pardonne à Dieu qui se repent” and “rythme d’une nuit / afro-cubaine”⁶ in “Tandis qu’il agonise,” but most of *Graffiti* is more subtle than that. Often, Damas uses imagery of the hot sun and dark night instead of dealing with race explicitly. He expresses discomfort with the Catholic Church (“Il me souvient encore,” “Comme un rosaire,” “Je ne sais en vérité,” “Je pense au salut de l’amour dans la fuite”) and the Catholic God (“Pardonne à Dieu qui se repent,” “Et maintenant”) – the

⁵ my Afro-Amerindian fugue

⁶ rhythm of an Afro-Cuban / night

religion of the oppressor. More than anything, *Graffiti* is about the pain of rejection, which, in the larger context of Damas' oeuvre, can be applied to both heartbreak and racial exclusion, and even political unpopularity.

The ideal reading of *Graffiti* would find a happy medium between Halling's racial-allegorical interpretation and Hodge's "racially anonymous" analysis. Mercer Cook put it best when examining *Névralgies*, a collection that comprises many of the poems from *Graffiti* along with some new poems. He wrote, "the racial content of *Névralgies* is more implicit than explicit...the emphasis is elsewhere: on dreams that do not materialize; on loves and lives that do not last" (Cook 117). These failed dreams could include his loss of critical and public appeal as well as any post-colonial interpretation. It is important to note that Damas wrote *Graffiti* as his marriage to Isabelle Achille, his first wife, was falling apart. They would divorce in 1953, a year after the publication of *Graffiti* (Halling 31). However, many of the poems rail against a plural foe, the unspecified uns/autres/vous (ones/others/you plural). These poems seem to defy a love-centric reading, but are not explicitly racial either. They make the most sense when read as the poet railing against a critical mass that does not want him to grow, and therefore does not understand him anymore.

In spite of critical neglect, Damas is an essential member of the negritude movement. He used his multinational, French imperial education to build a new literary movement. He united the movement in France with the slightly older New Negro movement in the United States. He built on ideas and techniques from the Harlem Renaissance to write *Pigments*, the manifesto of the negritude

movement. His work inspired his contemporaries and successors within the movement. Though he certainly had qualifications that merit the same amount of study as his co-founders, Césaire and Senghor, he has been completely overshadowed by them, largely because his work evolved in a subtler, more personal direction. His poems in *Graffiti* were not explicitly revolutionary, so they were rejected by critics who expected a new work akin to *Pigments II*. Damas and *Graffiti* are worthy of study even though they were misunderstood and consequentially dismissed. Damas' poetry is important because it shows us another side of the negritude poet, a side that is intensely personal and widely universal at the same time.

Translator's Preface

“Peut-on traduire un poème, non. On y rencontre trop de contradictions qu’on ne peut lever, on doit faire trop d’abandons.” —Yves Bonnefoy

“Can you translate a poem? No. You encounter too many irresolvable contradictions; you must make too many sacrifices.” —Yves Bonnefoy

Translation is more than the practice of substituting words in one language for those in another. If it were such an automatic process, then electronic translation software would work perfectly in every situation. Rather, there are nuances that do not translate directly from one language to another. In some cases, a particular word in one language can only be translated by a long phrase in another. Certain phrases are idiomatic, and make no sense at all when translated literally into a different language (See Bassnett 33-9). Puns and jokes are even more difficult. Many times, the differences in syntax require the translator to significantly alter the structure of a sentence, or even an entire section, just to make it readable in the target language. Most of the time, however, the difficulties are far less explicit; the translator must consider all connotations and all possible meanings of words in both languages to find the proper expression in the new language.

Translating poetry is an even more complicated process. As shown in the epigraph above, many translators even claim that it cannot be done. One can approach translating prose by trying to abstract the meaning of the original, carry it over to the target language, and rephrase it in a way the new reader can understand. In poetry, there are additional formal constraints, and issues of rhythm and rhyme to consider. Word order is more important in poetry than it is in prose, putting more pressure on the translator to take a word-for-word approach to translating poetry. Unfortunately, that method is impractical because it forces the translator to ignore poetic devices, such as assonance and alliteration (which Damas uses often), and rhyme (which he uses occasionally). Plus, it usually destroys the rhythm of the poem, and makes the poem unnecessarily difficult for the reader to understand. According to Roman Jakobson, aspects of the specific words, such as sound and rhythm, become part of the meaning in poetry where they wouldn't be in prose (238). In poetry, sometimes the particular idea presented is less important than the sound and style creating the overall effect. This significantly alters the translator's task. Now, he or she must identify the effect created in one language, and mirror it in another.

My main goal in this translation is to make one of Léon-Gontran Damas' lesser-known poetry collections accessible to an Anglophone readership that does not read French well enough to understand the original version. To serve this goal, I have favored the translation decisions that I believe are most in line with his style, even when they are not the most literal ones. This means that

sometimes I slightly altered the sense or the order of the lines to preserve the literary devices Damas employs. One example of this is in “Quand malgré moi” (“When In Spite of Myself”) when I translated the line “qu’emplit l’écœurement d’un éreintant tic-tac” as “dense with the disgust of a deafening tick-tock.” Here, I judged the sound of the line to be more important than its exact literal meaning, so I chose words that followed a similar rhythm and alliterative pattern, but also created a very similar image to Damas’ original.

Because I translated a collection of poems together, rather than only a couple of separate poems, I had to pay special attention to how I translated recurring phrases across multiple poems. In “D’avoir un instant cru” (“Having For One Moment Believed”), Damas writes of his “cœur de fou” which I translate as “mad...heart.” Later, in “Aimer tout comme hier” (“Loving Just Like Yesterday”), he writes of an “air de fou.” Had I been translating this poem independently from the collection, I probably would have changed that phrase to something like “silly song,” but because I had previously translated “de fou” as “mad,” I translated “air de fou” to “mad air” to keep consistency between the poems. Similarly, in “Elle s’en vint” (“She Escapes”), I wanted to translate “drame” as “tragedy,” so when Damas used that same word again in “Vous dont les ricanements” (“You Whose Snickering”), I again translated it as “tragedy,” even though the exact meaning of “drame” in that poem was somewhat more ambiguous.

In preparing this project, I read translation theory by Lawrence Venuti. Venuti’s main argument is for a technique called “foreignization,” which is an

elaboration of Friedrich Schleiermacher's technique described in his essay "On the Different Methods of Translating," for bringing the reader closer to the original author. For Venuti, foreignization is the idea that a translated work should retain some foreign elements so the reader is aware that it, in this case, is not actually a collection of English poetry, but rather French poetry rendered in English. In foreignization, the conventions of the target language, English in this case, are purposely transgressed to keep the reader aware of the linguistic and cultural difference between their language and the original. I kept these ideas in mind as I was creating my translations, though my work is not foreignizing in any programmatic way. Instead, I considered David Bellos' criticism of foreignization, that the result often sounds clumsy, incorrect, or even insulting when taken to an extreme (44-59), and I used this idea to develop a style that respected the language of the original without remaining so faithful that it became a parody of it. As my goal is to introduce these poems to a new group of readers, I did not want the translations to seem so foreign and unrecognizable that an Anglophone would be unable to understand them and would perhaps even give up in frustration. Particularly with syntax problems, ignoring English conventions could make the poems incomprehensible in many cases. That being said, I did try to translate in such a way that the reader would never wholly lose sight of the text's foreignness.

Mimicking French structures in English can cause interesting side effects. For "Toujours ces mots" ("Always These Words"), it is possible to write the English version with nearly the same word order as the original French;

however the result sounds much more formal in English than it did in French. Though this formality is not ideal, it was necessary to preserve elements of suspense and emphasis. I knew I had to end the English version with the word “cruelty,” and that I should even keep the entire last line as close to the original as possible, translating it as “all of the pointless cruelty.” Once I had established that, I had to work out the middle. The word “dont” is tricky because English does not have a comparable pronoun. Because I wanted to keep the suspense of the poem, I had no room to rearrange the lines. The best translation for “dont” in this context is “of which,” the phrase that makes the English version sound so formal. While I understood this formality to be a sacrifice, my interpretation of the poem is such that it was less important than the suspense leading to the word “cruelty.”

I found the concept of foreignization useful again for a word order choice in “Tout à ce besoin d’évasion” (“All For This Need to Escape”). The result is unusual in English, but not so unusual that it is confusing. In French, possessives are written in the form, “[noun] de [name]” rather than “[name]’s [noun],” as they are usually written in English. In that same poem, Damas writes of the “soleil... / d’août”, which I choose to write as “sun / of August” rather than “August sun.” The word order is slightly unusual for English, but still understandable, making possible a translation that reminded the reader of the French original without obscuring the meaning. In that same poem, I chose to keep “Côte d’Azur” in French for the same reason, rather than translating it into “Azur Coast” or using the English name, “French Riviera.”

In that same poem, however, I came across a specific problem that I thought was best solved by finding a creative English solution, rather than dogmatically following the original. The second half of the last stanza sets up a play on words: “et rien à mon casier d’hôtel / si ce n’est / pauvre pendu / la clé qui se balance / la clef qui s’en balance.” The last two lines use two different spellings of the same word, clé/clef, but also completely change meaning with the addition of only an apostrophe and the letter “n” to the word “se.” This changes it from the image of a key swinging in an otherwise empty hotel mailbox, likened to a hangman, to a cruelly indifferent key that doesn’t care about the speaker’s troubles. Because idioms don’t usually translate well, I couldn’t just translate the words. I had to find English idioms that were similar, and that also compared the key to a hangman. I changed the order around, used completely different idioms, and even added an extra line to get a similar effect in English. Eventually I settled on “each day nothing in my hotel box / except for / that humble hangman / my key / hanging by a thread / hanging in the balance.” This is an imperfect solution, because while it conveys a certain anxiety, it does not match the paranoia of the original French. Now, rather than judging him, the key itself is in peril. This still works because it creates a very similar effect, but now the key is a metaphor for the speaker’s failed relationship rather than another piece of evidence that the outside world is against him.

Another specific problem I had was the double meaning of the French word “vers.” As mentioned earlier, puns are notoriously difficult to translate. In French, the word “vers” can mean either verses or worms. There is no single

English word that has both of those meanings. Damas uses the double meaning in two different poems. The first time, in “Tandis qu’il agonise” (“While He Agonizes”), is subtle, and only implied. In the last stanza, Damas uses “vers” primarily to mean “verses,” but because this poem addresses death and impermanence, and specifically describes a mausoleum, there is no question that he intended for the reader to pick up on the “worms” meaning as well, eating away at the dead man who vainly attempted to memorialize himself in the grandest manner possible. Unfortunately, I could not find a way to preserve both meanings without significantly altering the text, so I chose the word “verses,” which is also conveniently the cognate.

The next instance is found in a clever use of enjambment in the penultimate line of “Et maintenant” (“And Now”). This line is tricky because, isolated as “que de s’attendrir sur un fruit mûr piqué des vers,” “vers” only seems to mean “worms” (literally “than to be moved by a ripe fruit snatched from worms”); but when attached to the next line, as “vers / sur des amours frappées à mort du doute amer,” it seems to mean “verses” (literally “verses on loves beaten to death by bitter doubt”). I needed to find a way to describe both worm-eaten fruit and love poems in the English version, ideally one in which the ambiguity was made possible by a line break. To do this, I decided to describe them as “writhing lines,” thereby retaining the image of worms but also keeping the sense of silly love poems. I placed the line break between “writhing” and “lines,” so that the ambiguity would not be resolved until the last line, creating a sense of suspense similar to the original. “Piqué” provides a small difficulty as

well. It usually means “stung,” “stuck,” “pricked,” or “jabbed,” and in this case could mean “riddled” with worms, but it can also mean “stolen,” “nicked,” “nabbed,” or “pinched,” more familiarly. I chose to use the “stolen” sense because it allows me to use cognate “picked” and keep the same sharp sound of “piqué,” plus it works better for the double meaning in English. I also chose the phrase “struck dead” rather than “beaten to death” because “beaten to death” makes it sound like the human lovers were murdered, rather than only the amorous feelings killed.

Line breaks become especially important when they include a poem’s first line, since in *Graffiti* the poems’ first lines also function as their titles. Most of Damas’ poems are quite short, so there is little room to change the word order without changing the emphasis and rhythm, and sometimes even the poem’s title. One poem begins, “Je ne sais en vérité / rien de plus triste...” This could be rendered in English most simply as “In Truth I Know / nothing so glum,” however as these are the first two lines of the poem, “Je ne sais en vérité” is also the poem’s title. This would mean that I hadn’t only simplified in my English version, but I had also completely changed the title of the poem to the opposite meaning of the original French title. Instead, I chose the less natural first line, “In Truth I Don’t Know.” This allows the French and English titles to mean the same thing, and it includes that element of foreignization that we explored earlier.

The problems I have discussed so far sometimes appeared one after another in quick succession, even in very short poems. In the nine-line poem,

“Comme un rosaire” (“Like a Rosary”), I encountered polysemy, near-perfect matches, and syntax issues. There is no exact English word that could replace the word “s’égrène” in the second line. The verb “égrèner” could mean “to shuck or seed a vegetable,” or “to tell your beads,” or “to list one by one.” In a literary context, it could mean “to suffuse” or “to permeate.” The reflexive, “s’égrèner,” can mean “to be strung out,” “to be spread across,” or “to disperse or scatter.” So, I tried to find a very short way to include what meanings I could. “Égrèner,” also spelled “égrainer,” has the root “grain” which usually means “grain” or “seed.” I wanted one verb that would express both the passage of time and the act of saying the rosary, but that would also include the idea of time moving grain by grain (as through an hourglass) and telling the rosary bead by bead. Because I could not find a single English word that included all of those meanings, I decided to focus on the aspect of prayer. In the end, I chose the phrase “prayed away.” I used the verb “prayed” rather than “told” or “said” because I thought it would be more easily understood by an Anglophone reader who may be confused by vague verbs. I also chose “prayed” because it allowed me to retain a similar vowel sound to the original French. I wrote “prayed away” rather than just “prayed” because that way I could keep the idea of time passing and slipping away. Unfortunately, I was unable to include the seed or grain aspect of the word. All of this for just one word in one poem!

The third and fourth lines of the same poem could be translated literally into English, but must be examined thoroughly before coming to a final decision. I adjusted the English slightly so that it would flow better. Literally, “pour le

repos / d'une âme" translates to "for the repose / of a soul." That translation is awkward and passive in English, and it doesn't really make sense. Instead, I simply wrote, "for the soul's / repose." This translation is true to Damas' economy of language, however it emphasizes the word "repose" rather than "soul." There is a similar situation in line six, with the phrase, "par cinq," which I resolved differently. I eventually decided to translate it fairly literally, as "by fives." Unfortunately, this phrase sticks out in English because it is not as common as in French. However, alternatives such as "five by five" or "in fifths" were even worse.

The last three lines of this poem provide an example of how French syntax does not work in English. French usually places the adjective after the noun, allowing Damas to end the poem on the adjective, "hanté." This would sound extremely awkward in English. Literally, "dans un silence / de monastère / hanté" translates to "in a silence / of monastery / haunted." Clearly that does not work. One option is to keep it very close to the original French: "in a haunted / monastery / silence." This keeps "monastery" as a descriptor for "silence," as it is in the French, but by ending on the single word, "silence," that word is emphasized, just like "hanté" was in the French. Since I couldn't end the poem with the word "haunted," I had to choose between ending on "silence" or "monastery." I chose to end on "monastery" because it gave the poem's religious elements closure. I couldn't write "haunted / monastery" because in English (especially American English) that brings to mind the image of a childish, church-sponsored haunted house, complete with cotton spider webs and

teenagers in zombie face paint. Instead, I chose the word “ghostly” because it was just as sinister, without such a strong Halloween connotation.

Overall, the process of translating *Graffiti* was extremely gratifying. It forced me to consider the significance of all possible meanings for every word. Though it is impossible to create an exact equivalent from one language to another, new merit can be found in an analogous work. It provides a similar experience for an entirely new set of readers who would never before have had access to *Graffiti*. It also provides a particular set of interpretations, especially to a reader of both French and English. I hope that this translation widens the audience for Damas’ poetry, and I hope that you have as much fun reading it as I had writing it.

—LAURA HESS

GRAFFITI

MALGRÉ LES SARCASMES DES UNS

malgré l'indulgence des autres

et au grand dam des uns

et au grand dam des autres

plaise à mon cœur

mis un instant à nu

d'afficher sur les murs et autres lieux de la ville

de crier à tue-tête sur les toits de la ville

à bas TOUT

vive RIEN

de quoi les uns

de quoi les autres auront-ils l'air avec

avec tous leurs sarcasmes

avec avec leur indulgence

DESPITE THE SARCASM OF SOME

despite the indulgence of others

and to the dismay of some

and to the dismay of others

it thrills my heart

laid bare a moment

to post on walls and all around the city

to shout at the top of my lungs from the roof-tops of the city

down with ALL

long live NONE

how will some

how will others seem with

with all their sarcasm

with with all their indulgence

IL ME SOUVIENT ENCORE

de l'année foutue

où j'eusse

pu

tout aussi bien

sucer

et le pouce

et l'index

du sorcier en soutane

au lieu de l'avaler l'hostie

ma foi mon dieu

mains jointes

I STILL REMEMBER

that fucked up year

when I

could

just as well

have sucked

the thumb

and index finger

of that warlock in a cassock

instead of swallowing the host

my faith my god

hands clasped

COMME UN ROSAIRE

s'égrène

pour le repos

d'une âme

mes nuits s'en vont

par cinq

dans un silence

de monastère

hanté

LIKE A ROSARY

prayed away

for the soul's

repose

my nights pass

by fives

in the silence

of a ghostly

monastery

SUR LE SEIN

bel et bien

flasque

d'un luxe

de maquillage

défait

je me suis

au tout petit matin

reveillé blême

de dépit

ON THE BREAST

at its best

soft

with a wealth

of undone

makeup

I awoke

in the early morning

bleared

with regret

LES VAGISSEMENTS

du Petit-de-l'Homme

qui pourra étrangler à jamais

bombarder à la main

la tristesse

le dépit

et la haine qui aime

la haine

et l'amour qui hait

l'amour

Vous arrive-t-il d'entendre

les vagissements

du Petit-de-l'Homme

qui pourra étrangler à jamais

bombarder à la main

la tristesse

le dépit

l'amour qui hait

la haine qui aime

de tristesse

de dépit

THE WAILS

of the Son-of-Man

who could strangle forever

smash away

the sadness

the regret

and the hate that loves

hate

and the love that hates

love

Can you hear

the wails

of the Son-of-Man

who could strangle forever

smash away

the sadness

the regret

the love that hates

the hate that loves

with sadness

with regret

MON CŒUR RÊVE DE BEAU CIEL PAVOISÉ DE BLEU

d'une mer déchaînée

contre l'homme

l'inconnu à la barque

qui se rit au grand large

de mon cœur qui toujours rêve

rêve et rêve

de beau ciel

sur une mer de bonheurs impossibles

MY HEART DREAMS OF A BEAUTIFUL SKY PAVED WITH BLUE

of a sea unleashed

against man

the unknown on the barque

who laughs at the open expanse

of my heart that still dreams

dreams and dreams

of a beautiful sky

on a sea of impossible joys

ELLE S'EN VINT

d'Elle-même

un soir

rôder un soir

autour de ma détresse

de chien tout fou

de chien-tout-nu

de chien tout chien

tout fou

tout nu

Ainsi

sans plus

naquit

le drame

SHE ESCAPES

from Herself

one night

prowling one night

around

my distress

a mad dog's

a sad dog's

a dogged dog's

all mad

all sad

From this

alone

the tragedy

is born

D'AVOIR UN INSTANT CRU

à la main dégantée

à la main dégantée au printemps

dégantée au printemps né

au printemps né de la magie

de la magie du rythme

le meute édentée

scrofuleuse

et borgne

a crié sus

à mon cœur de fou sans haine

HAVING FOR ONE MOMENT BELIEVED

in the ungloved hand

in the ungloved hand in springtime

ungloved hand in springtime born

in springtime born of the magic

of the magic of rhythm

the toothless pack

scrofulous

and one-eyed

cried out

against my mad unhating heart

POURQUOI

grands dieux

faut-il que tout se chante

fût-ce

l'amour

à tout jamais soudain

d'une pureté d'albâtre

WHY

dear gods

must everything be sung

even

love

ever sudden

with an alabaster purity

PARDONNE À DIEU QUI SE REPENT

de m'avoir fait

une vie triste

une vie rude

une vie dure

une vie âpre

une vie vide

car

à l'orée du bois

sous lequel nous surprit

la nuit d'avant ma fugue afro-amérindienne

je t'avouerai sans fards

tout ce dont en silence

tu m'incrimines

A PARDON TO GOD WHO REPENTS

for giving me

a sad life

a hard life

a harsh life

a rough life

a blank life

for

at the edge of the woods

where we were surprised

the night before by my Afro-Amerindian fugue

I will confess plainly

to all of your silent

accusations

JE NE SAIS EN VÉRITÉ

rien de plus triste

de plus odieux

de plus affreux

de plus lugubre au monde

que d'entendre l'amour

à longuer de journée

se répétant

à messe

basse

Il était une fois

une femme vint à passer

dont les bras était chargés de roses

IN TRUTH I DON'T KNOW

anything more glum

more odious

more atrocious

more lugubrious in the world

than hearing love repeat

all day long

to itself

at mass

hushed

Once upon a time

a woman passed by

whose arms were laden with roses

VOUS DONT LES RICANEMENTS

d'obscurs couloirs d'air

me donnent la chair de poule

Vous dont le visage

bouffi rappelle

ce masque qu'empruntait souvent à plaisir

par-delà les mornes agrestes

la lune

la lune de mon enfance sordide

Vous dont je sens

vous dont je sais le cœur

aussi vide de tendresse

que les puits de chez nous d'eau

au dernier carême

Vous dont la présence

proche ou lointaine

énervé ma vie

comme la vieille folle du coin

mon premier sommeil

Vous dont le crime est d'en vouloir
à l'image
qu'il m'a plu
d'avoir un matin
d'ELLE

Vous dont les ricanements
vous dont le visage
vous dont le cœur
la présence
le crime

Et puis vous tous
enfin vous autres
saisirez-vous jamais un rien même
à ce poème
mon drame

YOU WHOSE SNICKERING

like a dark blast of air
gives me goose bumps

You whose swollen face
reminds me
of that mask borrowed often by
the moon
beyond the rustic hills
the moon of my sordid childhood

You whose heart I think
you whose heart I know
is as devoid of tenderness
as our wells were of water
last year at Lent

You whose presence
near or far
unnerves my life
like that woman raving on the corner
my first night

You whose crime is begrudging

the image

I wanted

to have one morning

of HER

You whose snickering

you whose face

you whose heart

whose presence

whose crime

And then all of you

in short you others

will you ever grasp anything at all

from this poem

my tragedy

DÉSIR D'ENFANT MALADE

d'avoir été

trop tôt sevré du lait pur

de la seule vraie tendresse

j'aurais donné

une pleine vie d'homme

pour te sentir

te sentir près

près de moi

de moi seul

seul

toujours près

de moi seul

toujours belle

comme tu sais

tu sais si bien

toi seule

l'être toujours

après avoir pleuré

A SICK CHILD'S WISH

having been

weaned too soon from the pure milk

from the only true tenderness

I'd have given

my whole life

to feel you

feel you close

close to me

to me alone

alone

always close

to me alone

always beautiful

as you know

you know so well

you alone

will always be

after crying

AVEC UN RIEN MÊME DE DÉDAIN

dans le regard ouvert de stupeur

la lune

jaune ronde et belle

semble dire à voix basse

En auront-ils bientôt fini les fous

de mitrailler le ciel

de s'en prendre aux étoiles

de tonner sans vergogne

contre ces nuits

où j'eusse aimé

dormir

dormir un seul et long soûl

d'homme ivre

et

rêver

rêver encore

tout à l'aise encore

d'ELLE

WITH THE SLIGHTEST BIT OF DISDAIN

in an openly dazed look

the moon

yellow and round and beautiful

seems to say in a low voice

Are these fools quite finished

firing on the sky

picking fights with the stars

railing without shame

against these nights

when I would have

slept

slept that long unbroken slumber

of drunkenness

and

dreamt

dreamt even now

peacefully even now

of HER

PAR LA FENÊTRE OUVERTE À DEMI

sur mon dédain du monde

une brise montait

perfumée au stéphanotis

tandis que tu tirais à TOI

tout le rideau

Telle

je te revois

te reverrai

toujours tirant à TOI

tout le rideau

du poème où

Dieu que tu es belle

mais

longue à être nue

THROUGH THE WINDOW HALF-OPENED

on my disdain for the world

a breeze lifted

perfumed with jasmine

while you pulled the curtains

all towards YOU

Thus

I see you again

will see you again

always pulling the curtains

all towards YOU

in the poem where

My god you're beautiful

but

slow to be naked

SOUDAIN D'UNE CRUAUTÉ FEINTE

tu m'as dit d'une voix de regrets faite

tu m'as dit en me quittant hier

tu m'as dit de ne pas pouvoir me voir

avant dix à treize jours

Pourquoi treize

et pas quinze

et pas vingt

et pas trente

Pourquoi treize

et pas douze

et pas huit

et pas dix

et pas quatre

et pas deux

Pourquoi pas demain

la main dans la main

la main sur le tien

la main sur le mien

la main sur le coeur

de mon cœur qui s'inquiète
et qui déjà redoute
d'avoir un beau jour
à t'attendre en vain

SUDDENLY WITH A SLY CRUELTY

you told me in a voice filled with rote regret

you told me as you left me yesterday

you told me you could not see me

for ten or thirteen days

Why thirteen

and not fifteen

and not twenty

and not thirty

Why thirteen

and not twelve

and not eight

and not ten

and not four

and not two

Why not tomorrow

hand in hand

hand on yours

hand on mine

hand on my heart

of hearts that doubts
and already dreads
that one fine day
I will have waited for you in vain

TOUTE À CE BESOIN D'ÉVASION

depuis peu satisfait

après avoir des mois durant

si habilement su le cacher

Toute à la joie folle

de te donner nue

au soleil dru

d'août

Toute à l'illusion

d'être libérée

d'un amour qui te pèse à la longue

Toute enfin à cette Côte d'Azur

pas trop retrouvée

et à laquelle maintenant t'attachent

des instants de bonheur à t'en croire

spirituel

Toute à ton besoin

toute à ta joie

toute à l'illusion

toute à cette Côte d'Azur
toute enfin à toi-même et seule
mais rien
mais encore toujours rien
et rien à mon casier d'hôtel
si ce n'est
pauvre pendu
la clé qui se balance
la clef qui s'en balance

ALL FOR THIS NEED TO ESCAPE

satisfied just recently

having been hidden so well

for months

All for the mad joy

of offering you naked

to the abundant sun

of August

All for the illusion

of being free

from a love now weighing on you

All in the end for the Côte d'Azur

rarely revisited

where moments of happiness now stick to you

from believing that you were

spiritual

All for your need

all for your joy

all for the illusion

all for that Côte d'Azur
all in the end for you alone
but nothing
still nothing
each day nothing in my hotel box
except for
that humble hangman
my key
hanging by a thread
hanging in the balance

TU NE SAURAS JAMAIS

combien

depuis pourtant fort peu

je la sens

sur mon cœur

s'appesantir ta tête

ta tête que mes mains

seraient maintenant

mal venues à chérir

YOU WILL NEVER KNOW

how much

and yet how recently

I began to feel it

on my heart

weighing on your head

your head which my hands

would now be

unwelcome to adore

TANDIS QU'IL AGONISE

sans peur

ni prêtre

plus blanc que drap

plus essoufflé

qu'un train qui rentre en gare

d'un fabuleux parcours

l'amour râle un poème

comme d'autres

confient un dernier acte

Et les vers d'eux-mêmes

s'inscrivent

au fronton du mausolée marmoréen

debout à l'image agrandie

de ce qui fut

au rythme d'une nuit

afro-cubaine

WHILE HE AGONIZES

fearless

and priestless

whiter than a sheet

and more winded

than a train returning to the station

from a fantastic journey

love gasps out a poem

the way others

confess their dying words

And the verses of their own accord

inscribe themselves

in a mausoleum's marmoreal façade

erected to the grandiose image

of what had been

in the rhythm of an

Afro-Cuban night

QUAND MALGRÉ MOI

bien malgré je pense

qu'au bras d'un autre

tu dors

alors

ma tête entre mes mains brûlantes

alors mon cœur mon cœur

mon pauvre cœur malade

alors seulement je réalise

l'horreur

la pleine horreur

la laideur

toute la laideur

d'une vie étrange et mienne

murs bleus

murs nus

murs blancs d'hôtel gris

murs nus d'hôtel gris

qu'emplit l'écoeurement d'un éreintant tic-tac

qu'importe puisque

malgré moi bien malgré moi je pense qu'au bras d'un autre

tu dors

comme d'une rive à l'autre

heureuse et calme

l'eau dort

WHEN IN SPITE OF MYSELF

truly in spite I think

of you in another's arms

asleep

then

my head between my burning hands

then my heart my heart

my poor heavy heart

only then do I realize

the horror

the simple horror

the ugliness

all the ugliness

of a life both strange and mine

blue walls

bare walls

blank walls in a gray hotel

bare walls in a gray hotel

dense with the disgust of a deafening tick-tock

no matter since

in spite of myself truly in spite I think of you in another's arms

asleep

just as from one bank to another

happy and calm

water sleeps

TOUJOURS CES MOTS

toujours les mêmes

dont il ne semble pas

qu'elle ait encore

jamais jamais

saisi sur l'heure

toute l'inutile cruauté

ALWAYS THESE WORDS

always the same

of which it seems

she might still

never never

have grasped straight away

all of the pointless cruelty

AIMER TOUT COMME HIER

que sans frapper

elle ouvre

entre

comme

jamais personne

d'autre

c'est encore attendre

des heures

de longues heures

en sifflotant

toujours le même air de fou

debout

contre la vitre embuée

où montent

le bruit lourd

l'odeur du jour qui va bientôt finir

LOVING JUST LIKE YESTERDAY

when without knocking

she opens

enters

like

nobody

else

once again waiting

for hours

for long hours

whistling

always that same mad air

standing

at the fogged window

where

a heavy noise rises

with the odor of a day that will soon end

ET MAINTENANT

vois-tu

maintenant que les étoiles en sont venues

à filer toutes

à un train de chauffard

Inutile d'implorer

L'existence de Dieu se fait

plus que jamais

problématique

Passé minuit passé minuit

minuit passé

Inutile d'insister

Radio-Radio n'émettra

ni le

Boléro

ni les

Ballets russes

Du geste large du semeur
inutile à distance
d'empoisonner la Mer

La pieuvre invulnérable
renaît toujours d'Elle-même

Entre nous
pas de cadavres

Inutile d'évoquer
la tendresse
des élans de
NAGUÈRE

Et surtout
une fois pour toutes

tiens-le pour dit de bon
tiens-le pour dit de vrai
tiens-le pour dit de sûr
et toujours entre guillemets

AVANT la NOCE on affûte
les COUTEAUX

Inutile
de vouloir après coup
de vouloir à tout prix
soulever à tout prix le Monde

Le Monde a vois-tu
bien d'autres choses en tête
que de s'attendrir sur un fruit mûr piqué des vers
sur des amours frappées à mort du doute amer

AND NOW

do you see

now that the stars have come out

flying by

at breakneck speed

Useless to implore

The existence of God is

now more than ever

problematic

Past midnight past midnight

midnight passed

Useless to insist

Radio-Radio will transmit

neither

Boléro

nor the

Ballets russes

To the sower's wide gesture
useless from a distance
for poisoning the Sea

The invulnerable octopus
is always reborn from Her-self

No skeletons
between us

Useless to evoke
tenderness
from the ecstasies of
TIMES PAST

And above all
once and for all

take it as read for good
take it as read for truth
take it as read for sure
and always in quotes

BEFORE the WEDDING we sharpen
the KNIVES

Useless

to wish after the fact

to wish at any cost

to change the Times at any cost

The Times you see

have many other things in mind

besides weeping over a ripe fruit picked from the writhing

lines of loves struck dead by bitter doubt

JE PENSE AU SALUT DE L'AMOUR DANS LA FUITE

loin de matins à poubelles

loin de crachats gelés l'hiver

loin d'un soleil de confection

toujours prêt à porter la mort

loin de mains tendues à la belle charité chrétienne

loin de tant

et tant de visages de haine

loin de nuages

que nul ne voit s'amonceler

et qui menacent de rompre soudain

le charme de tant de tête-à-tête endimanchés

joyeux de l'être

I THINK OF LOVE'S GOODBYE KISS

far from the trash can mornings

far from winter's frozen spit

far from a bespoke sun

always ready to wear death

far from the hands reaching out to beautiful Christian charity

far from so many

and so many faces of hate

far from clouds

which no one sees gathering

and which threaten to suddenly burst

the charm of so many tête-à-têtes in their Sunday best

happy to be so

DEPUIS BIENTÔT

déjà

trois ans

farouchement hostile

à tout élan

au moindre épanchement

le cœur n'a plus

qu'à se complaire

dans le rude et calme et dur

regret de jours

qu'il eût mieux valu

n'avoir jamais d'une vie d'homme

vu luire

FOR NEARLY

three years

already

fiercely hostile

to all desire

to the slightest effusion

the heart has nothing left

but to bask

in the harsh and calm and hard

regret

that it would have been better

not to have seen in all its life

those shining days

JAMAIS PLUS

jamais plus une après-midi chaude sur deux

d'illusions

de rêves

la pâle angoisse la folle inquiétude

n'auront à se ronger les ongles

d'attendre à la fenêtre qui regardait d'un œil vague

le gazon incliné du jardin sur lequel deux chères choses pépiaient si tendrement

l'amour

Car jamais plus

jamais plus une après-midi chaude sur deux d'illusions de rêves

la pale angoisse la folle inquiétude à se ronger les ongles

d'attendre à la fenêtre

qui regardait d'un œil vague

le gazon incliné du jardin sur lequel deux chères choses prépiaient si tendrement

l'amour

ne verront plus jamais s'en venir

le doux sourire des roses rouges

NEVERMORE

nevermore one hot afternoon out of two

with illusions

with dreams

will pale anguish and mad worry

have to bite their nails

waiting at the window that casts a blurry eye

on the sloping lawn of the garden where two dear things chirped so tenderly of

love

For nevermore

nevermore one hot afternoon out of two with illusions with dreams

will pale anguish and mad worry bite their nails

waiting at the window

that casts a blurry eye

on the sloping lawn of the garden where two dear things chirped so tenderly of

love

they will nevermore see the coming of

the red roses' soft smile

IL N'EST PAS DE MIDI QUI TIENNE

et bien parce qu'il n'a plus vingt ans mon cœur

ni la dent dure de petite vieille

il n'est pas de midi qui tienne

Prenez-en donc votre parti

vous autres

qui ne parlez jamais d'amour

sans majuscule

et larme en coin

il n'est pas de midi qui tienne

Je l'ouvrirai

pas de midi qui tienne

Je l'ouvrirai

pas de midi qui tienne

J'ouvrirai la fenêtre au printemps que je veux éternel

THERE IS NO ENDURING NOON

because my heart is no longer twenty years old

and no longer has the sharp tongue of an old woman

there is no enduring noon

So choose your side

you others

who never speak of love

without a capital L

and a tear in your eye

there is no enduring noon

I will open it

no enduring noon

I will open it

no enduring noon

I will open the window to a springtime that I wish eternal

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