

Book Reviews

Dymphna Cusack, *Acier austral*, translated by Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan, preface by Marie Ramsland, Paris, Éditions L'Harmattan, Collection Lettres du Pacifique 59, September 2015, 382 pp., rrp 32 €, ISBN 978-2-34306-544-1.

Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan, *Transfert de langue, transfert de culture : la traduction en français du roman Southern Steel de l'Australienne Dymphna Cusack*, Oxford, Peter Lang, February 2012, 173 pp., rrp £ 35.00, ISBN 978-3-03530-217-2.

Despite the fact that she was a very well-known writer and social activist both in Australia and abroad, today the name Dymphna Cusack (1902–1981) is invariably associated with just one novel, her best-seller *Come in Spinner* (1951), which she wrote with Florence James. Cusack was a novelist, playwright, travel writer and above all a tireless advocate of a genuinely Australian literature that shows Australian life as it is really lived, especially urban life rather than the ever-popular bush, and characters who use their everyday language, whatever their background. In her writing she strove for a form of social realism; in her life, as a committed socialist/communist, she pursued social justice, for Aboriginal people, for workers, and especially for women who had to earn a living.

Southern Steel (1953), set in Newcastle, New South Wales, was a natural choice for Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan to translate as she lectures at the University of Newcastle. Cusack's novel, exemplifies nearly all of the causes she held dear, including her anti-war principles. Having lived and worked in Newcastle for two years (1942 and 1943), Cusack witnessed at first-hand the effects of war on a town, not only on those who fought, but also on those who did war work, including women, and all those left behind who had to cope with anxiety, uncertainty and dramatic social change.

The huge BHP steel works, the employer one way or another of most of the population, looms over everything in this port town on the New South Wales coast. It is wartime, just after the bombing of Darwin in February 1942 heightened the fear of invasion by the Japanese. On the personal level, growing tensions and disunity play out dramatically in the lives of three brothers: Bar, the clever, enthusiastic engineer destined for upper management in BHP, just returned from the USA with his social-climbing wife and small son; Rud, the steel worker, unionist and committed Communist; the youngest, Landy, a merchant seaman on a steel ship. Their old father has to watch helplessly as his family falls apart. Minor characters move around them, several of them women in various social situations, often complicated by the presence of American servicemen. Newcastle is not a large town and they know, or know of each other, their lives intersecting in unexpected ways.

Cusack vividly recreates the worlds of the steel worker and the merchant seaman with great attention to the jargon and colloquial language they use. Australian slang is well-known for its uniquely Australian elisions, syntax, vocabulary and references, e.g. ‘E’s as game as Ned Kelly’. As much of the book is based on direct speech ranging from standard Australian to multiple versions of working-class colloquialism, now seventy years old, *Southern Steel* presents a real challenge, an extraordinary degree of difficulty for any translator.

It is doubtful that a native French translator living in France could attempt the task. Even older Australians would not know some of the vocabulary that has become obsolete—a rebby, a crimpin’ joint, eating his crib—and a lot of the slang has the quaintness of that earlier master of the vernacular, C. J. Dennis’s *Sentimental Bloke*. It is also interesting to note examples of American slang coming into the language, especially from the boy Darrell, who is always being corrected by his mother. Vuaille-Barcan has recognized, analysed and rendered all these linguistic problems with remarkable skill, always keeping in mind Durack’s intentions and the needs of the French reader. Her use of colloquial speech that is older but still well-understood has provided the best solution for the translator. Of course there are always some fine distinctions that are too cumbersome to render: the difference between ‘yeah’ and ‘yairs’, the latter used by an older generation and/or people from the country, and usually drawled.

L'Harmattan has published *Acier austral* in an attractive volume with contemporary photos of Newcastle, including geographic landmarks often mentioned in the novel. It gives French readers an insight into ordinary life in an unfamiliar Australian industrial port during an extraordinary time in WWII.

Transfert de langue, transfert de culture, the theoretical foundation to the translation of *Southern Steel*, was actually published a few years before the novel itself. After presenting an analysis of Dymphna Cusack and her work, then her aims and approaches to *Southern Steel*, Vuaille-Barcan reviews theoretical aspects of literary translation, especially those concentrating on translating cultural content from one language to another. She found recent descriptive approaches the most relevant in forming her own and decides against 'assimilation' into the target language in general, resisting the tendency to 'elegance and uniformity'. For example, she chooses not to change proper names into the target language with one exception: 'Rud' (abbreviation of Rudder) becomes 'Gov' (from *gouvernail*), thus retaining the original play on words, as 'Gov' is also an abbreviation of 'Governor'. It is an ingenious way to preserve both the sound and the sense of the original. As mentioned above, the translator deals with the out-dated Australian slang by using older colloquial slang from the target language that is still well understood.

Taken together these two books would be of great interest and practical use to translators and translation theorists. The novel on its own is a significant contribution to making twentieth century Australian literature better known to the French reading public. As for the skill of the translator, in the words of the Sentimental Bloke, 'I dips me lid'.

Patricia Clancy

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Françoise Frenkel, *No Place to Lay One's Head (Rien où poser sa tête)*, translated by Stephanie Smee, North Sydney, Penguin Random House Australia, Vintage Imprint, May 2017, 304 pp., rrp AU\$ 34.95, ISBN 978-0-14378-411-1.

E-book available.

In 2010 a copy of Françoise Frenkel's book, *Rien où poser sa tête*, turned up in a bric-à-brac shop in Nice. It had first been published by Éditions Jeheber in Geneva in September 1945. What was the story behind this book? Who was Françoise Frenkel? Very little was to come to light. However, word about the book spread through a literary blog and eventually it came to the attention of Thomas Simonnet at l'Arbalète/Gallimard. In 2015 Gallimard published a French edition of the book, together with a dossier put together by Frédéric Maria of various documents relating to the author's life and a foreword by Patrick Modiano. The Australian translator Stephanie Smee is responsible for this fine English translation.

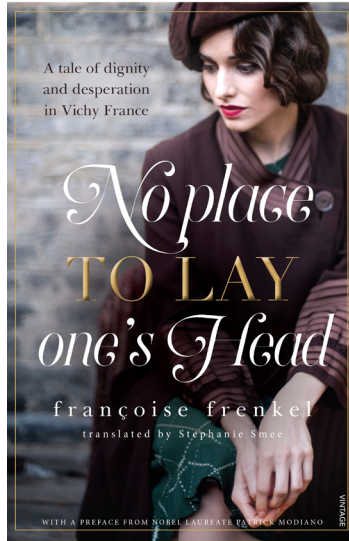
In his foreword to the book, Patrick Modiano writes about the lack of information about Frenkel's life. We do find out that she was married and her husband, Simon Raichenstein, was co-manager with her of the French bookshop in Berlin. He left Berlin for Paris in 1933, and was rounded up in Paris in July 1942, deported from Drancy and died in Auschwitz on 19 August 1942. Frenkel does not refer to her husband in her story.

There are traces of Frenkel's life after the war—she returned to Nice, where she died in 1975. But, as Modiano asks, do we need to know more? He refers to the book as a 'letter from an unknown woman, a letter forgotten *poste restante* for an eternity, that you've received in error, it seems, but that perhaps was intended for you'.

Yes, this was intended for us, and perhaps particularly so now as the world once again finds itself facing the moral dilemma of millions of refugees seeking protection from persecution, war or famine. This is the story of a woman who was in constant fear for her life as she fled first Berlin, then Paris as the German troops approached, then Nice, finally managing to escape, on her third attempt, across the border into Switzerland.

Françoise Frenkel was Polish. Life led her to Paris before the First World War where she studied at the Sorbonne and trawled the bookshops in the Latin Quarter and the *bouquinistes* along the Seine. Her love of books had started when she was very young.

In 1920 she returned to Poland planning to open a bookshop there, but everywhere she went there were bookshops displaying French books.



On her way back to Paris she stopped off in Berlin and found there, not surprisingly, a complete dearth of French books. She decided that this would be where she would open her French bookshop. Against all the odds, her bookshop started to flourish, patronised initially by foreigners rather than by Germans. The bookshop became extremely well-known and she regularly held readings and talks by many of France's leading writers who were passing through Berlin.

Frenkel describes the changing political climate in Germany through the 1930s and the difficulties she encountered in her bookshop and in her daily life. It wasn't until August 1939, that she finally decided she had to leave, accepting the advice of the French Consulate to take the train that would be leaving the following day for Paris. She said goodbye to her friends and to the bookshop.

Back in Paris, she at last obtained her residence permit, but 'the infinitely dark days of the new war' were about to tighten their grip. As the exodus of Parisians began, she accompanied her elderly, former professor to Avignon. Three days later bombs fell on Paris.

From Avignon to Vichy, back to Avignon and then to Nice, Frenkel was preoccupied with obtaining the necessary residency permits to allow her to stay legally. Her affection and her ties held her in Europe and she made no attempt to emigrate. Frenkel describes the life of waiting, 'a canvas upon which ever more meagre hopes and ever gloomier thoughts together embroidered their nostalgic motifs' (p. 106).

In July 1942, the waiting took on a different shade as the noose began to tighten around Jews, throughout France. Frenkel tried to get an exit visa to Switzerland but was refused. Foreign Jews were not allowed to leave France and soon, she was told at the prefecture, the law was to apply to French citizens also.

From August 1942, when the first round-up of Jewish people in Nice occurred, Frenkel went into hiding. For the next ten months her life was a cat and mouse story. One couple were steadfast in their support for her and in their hatred of the Germans. But others were less trustworthy and the threat of discovery or betrayal was always present.

As one reads, one cannot fail to admire the strength of character of Françoise Frenkel. She never falls into bitterness and despair and she acknowledges the courage and generosity of those people who were her friends and protectors, but also the many French families who offered shelter and provided a network of support for people like herself.

Frenkel was waiting for an entry visa to Switzerland that Swiss friends were trying to get for her and then she would make her own attempt to cross the border. After her first attempt, she is captured and imprisoned, she appears before a court and is granted permission to stay in the Annecy region.

Through these many months of waiting, she confronts people who have been turned against their fellow human beings by the corrupting influence of the Germans, who exercise their bureaucratic power as though they were themselves Nazis. But there are also the others, the ones who do all in their power to help and protect, from the couple in Nice who were steadfast in their support, to the lawyer who represented her in court and the elderly woman who escorted her to a restaurant when she found herself released from prison. 'Please Madame, allow me to walk next to you, just to the nearest restaurant.' Small gestures that meant so much to someone whose life was no longer under her own control.

Françoise Frenkel dedicated her book to the ‘men and women of good will who, generously, with unflinching courage, opposed the will to violence and resisted to the end’. It is a moving account, ‘a bitter, beautiful and important book’ as one reviewer wrote. Frenkel’s writing has clarity and honesty. We can feel her emotions, wonder at her refusal never to give up hope, and share her delight in her surroundings as she describes the flower market in Nice, the people she meets, and the villages and countryside she passes through.

As another ‘lost’ book, *No Place to Lay One’s Head* deserves to be as widely read as *Suite Française*. It is a small gem that shines light on this troubled period in France’s history.

Jane Gilmour

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George Sand, *Spiridion*, translated by Patricia J. F. Worth, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, May 2015, 248 pp., rrp US\$ 46.95, ISBN 978-1-43845-624-9.

E-book and paperback versions also available.

Spiridion was composed partly in France and partly in Majorca where George Sand sojourned with Frédérique Chopin and her children during the winter of 1838. Australian translator Patricia Worth brings *Spiridion* in English translation to contemporary readers. Worth’s linguistic and intellectual talents serve Sand well. Her knowledge of French, understanding of Sand’s persona and her work are profound. The translation of this difficult book is excellent, seamless, elegant, sustained and true to the original, and readers will appreciate the intellectual prowess of both the author and the translator. They will also enjoy the substantial introduction Patricia Worth has provided to contextualise the novel and its translation.

Spiridion was first published in a five part series in 1838 but George Sand, who had hurried to meet her publishers’ deadlines, was not pleased with the ending. Hence, the book was corrected and released in definitive form in 1842, and this is the version Patricia Worth has translated. Notwithstanding its author’s hesitations, *Spiridion* was from the very start well-received by readers and critics. Joël Cherburiez, writing in the *Revue critique des livres nouveaux* of 1838, judged it an ‘admirable piece in which the author’s genius rises to unprecedented height’.

Thackeray called George Sand ‘the most elegant writer her sex ever produced and the best writer in France today’ and, although he slammed the spiritual propositions Sand explored in *Spiridion*, he translated several excerpts into English. In 1868, Henry James criticised Thackeray’s opinions of Sand’s novel as ‘flimsy convictions against the serious and passionate ideas propounded in Madame Sand’s work’. For what truly impressed nineteenth century critics was the seriousness of George Sand’s project: *Spiridion* was a novel without dramatic trappings, a novel without love interest and, in fact, without a single female character.

Indeed, *Spiridion* takes place in an exclusively male environment: the decidedly unnatural, perverse and corrosive atmosphere of the all-male Catholic monastery. The novel is a scathing critique of most things Catholic and a remarkable exposition of the struggle pitching spiritual quest against blind faith and dogma. Set on the eve of the French Revolution and in an atmosphere of monastic creepiness, the story hinges on the three-way spiritual relationship between a young monk called Angel, his protector and teacher, Father Alexis, and the ghost and corpse of Alexis’ own deceased mentor, Spiridion—the founder of the monastery whose name provides the title for the novel. The story is told in the first person from Angel’s point of view, but Father Alexis’ ruminations on the evils of the Catholic faith and the nature of true divinity occupy most pages of the book.

The novel opens with Angel’s misery. The novice has been mistreated and ostracised by his fellow monks who are as vicious and treacherous as he is innocent and sincere. Wandering in desperate incomprehension through the monastery’s resonating corridors, Angel experiences a ghostly visitation which, rather than terrifying him, fills him with a sense of beauty and comfort. He later finds refuge with Father Alexis, a grumpy straight-talking older monk who lives as a hermit between his cell and the monastery’s library. Many years ago, Alexis removed himself from the corrupt company of the monks to dedicate himself to study. As he warms to Angel and accepts him as his spiritual son, Alexis narrates the events of his life and instructs his protégé in daring and dangerous truths: ‘I, from a Catholic became a Reformer, and from a Reformer, a philosopher’. And later... ‘while retaining the highest veneration and the purest enthusiasm for the Crucified One... reading the Reformists, I had ceased to be a Catholic; reading the philosophers, I ceased to be a Christian’.

Father Alexis is himself the spiritual heir of Father Spiridion who, as might be guessed, is none other than the ghost who so impressed Angel. Alexis tells Angel Spiridion's story, from his mentor's dissatisfaction with his native Judaism to his adoption of Protestantism, his conversion to Catholicism and his founding of the monastery—all of which allows George Sand to review the few strengths and the many more weaknesses of the organised religions of nineteenth century Europe. Even Catholicism turned out a great disappointment for Spiridion. Shortly after its founding, the monastery became a swamp of vice and spiritual disorder and Spiridion, disgusted with the fiendish monks, withdrew into meditation. He eventually reached his own truth and wrote it all down in a book no one has ever read (not even Alexis) and which he took with him to the grave for safe keeping. Alexis informs Angel that Spiridion's manuscript is still lying upon the dead author's breast, waiting in the dark and dank underground crypt of the monastery for the fearless and genuine man who will dare to retrieve it from the tomb. Alexis understands that Spiridion's ghost has identified Angel to be this man.

A young naïve monk, an older spiritual mentor, a ghost, a Book of Truth buried in a tomb, a monastery filled with villainous obfuscating monks... This is a plot line not altogether unfamiliar to contemporary readers. Patricia Worth writes that *Spiridion* influenced other authors of genius, notably Dostoyevsky who had a great admiration for Sand's novel, and that readers of *The Brothers Karamazov* will recognise Angel and Father Alexis in Alyosha and Father Zosima. Justifiably, Worth also offers this speculation: 'If Sand was influenced by her century's gothic mania, then readers of *The Name of the Rose* will wonder whether Umberto Ecco was influenced by *Spiridion*'.

There is, however, a literary world of difference between Dostoyevsky and Ecco's novels and George Sand's *Spiridion*. Despite the obvious Gothic trappings, *Spiridion* is not only devoid of fluff, as contemporary critics noted appreciatively, but pretty much devoid of anything in the way of plot, which warm-blooded readers might reasonably expect from a romantic novel published in the century of gothic mania. Patricia Worth is conscious of the fact: she calls *Spiridion* a gothic novel *of ideas*—and rightly so, for Sand's narrative is far more a philosophical treatise than it is a novel. It is a sort of (*The*) *Brothers Karamazov* excised from pretty much everything save for the conversations between Alyosha and Father Zosima. Which is to say that

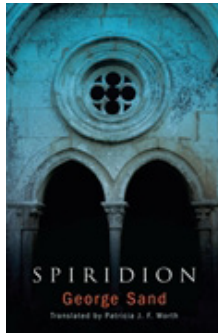
Spiridion is a book unlikely to appeal to readers looking for the thrill of the horror novel. This is a serious novel for serious readers seriously interested in spiritual matters, religion, philosophy, and history. *Spiridion* is a ‘slow-read’. It is a book for those ready to forego action and immerse themselves in George Sand’s intellect and the beauty of her expression.

The publishing of Patricia Worth’s translation of *Spiridion* is a significant event as there are no other available translations of George Sand’s book into English. In part, as Worth writes in her introduction, this is due to the fact that George Sand is now ‘a writer more talked about than read’. Certainly, we are still fascinated by the cigar-smoking blue stocking who laid claims to the hearts of Musset and Chopin, who inspired the admiration of Flaubert, Thackeray, and Dostoyevsky among others and who, in short, claimed her place as a woman, an artist and an intellectual in a man’s world that had little space and even less consideration for the members of her sex. But Patricia Worth believes that, in context of the deep crises Catholicism has experienced in recent decades, *Spiridion* has enduring relevance: George Sand’s novel exposes and condemns the abuse and the hypocrisy of those who, empowered by institutionalised religion and the outward displays of religiosity, act at the expense of true humanity and commit heinous crimes.

Unforgiving of the Church as Sand might be, Cherburiez rightly concluded in his 1838 review that her criticism of the monastic life was more intellectually brilliant than it was innovative. During the eighteenth century, when *Spiridion* is set, and just a few decades before George Sand was born, the philosophers of the Enlightenment—Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, d’Holbach, among others—denounced religious superstitions and prejudices and wrote at length and at great personal risk against the abuses of the Catholic Church. Indeed, the French Revolution was fuelled by anti-Catholicism, stoked too by the lure of the wealth of the Church. Sand was well aware of whence many of her ideas originated. Father Alexis and Angel discuss the philosophers, and *Spiridion* ends with the looting of the monastery and the murder of Father Alexis at the hands of drunken revolutionary soldiers—along with a remarkable spiritual realisation and philosophical twist which this reviewer will not spoil for the readers.

George Sand was firmly anchored in her times and so is her novel. The nineteenth century restored both the monarchy and Catholicism to France and ushered a political and social backlash. But what had been set

in motion could not be stopped. George Sand's century witnessed major political unrest as well as unbounded enthusiasm for the future. These were times powered by science, industry, nation and empire building; times for discovery, experimentation and revolution when thinkers, artists and Bohemians engaged in alternative cultural realities, and political philosophers were imagining the re-engineering of life in the here and now. For its part, Catholicism largely remained the soul-wringing, flesh-loathing, guilt-riddled enterprise of medieval France and, although it was still a major force, during the course of the nineteenth century it became almost entirely associated with the bourgeois and provincial classes as well as retrograde political conservatism.



Patricia Worth informs her readers that many of the philosophical and religious beliefs expressed in *Spiridion* were actually Sand's own. *Spiridion* tells the story of her own divorce from the Catholic Church. Judging by the sheer number of words which propel her characters on their spiritual discovery, apostasy was no simple matter for this author not inclined towards atheism. 'The Catholic', Father Alexis tells Angel, 'is not attached to anything in the history of the human species and is unable to attach anything to Christianity. He imagines he is the beginning and the end of the human race. For him alone the earth was created, for him innumerable generations have passed like vain shadows and fallen back into eternal night so their damnation can serve as an example and a lesson; for him God came to earth in human form.... When a Catholic has lost his blind respect for the Catholic Church where then can he take refuge? There is nothing more to do than to float on the ocean of the centuries like a boat without a rudder and without a compass, for he is not in the habit of looking at the world as his homeland and all men as his fellow creatures...'

Spiridion is not only a treatise against Catholicism in the guise of a novel. As Dostoyevsky saw it, no other writer of Sand's generation 'understood with such force that man shall not live by bread alone' (quoted in Worth's introduction). The words retrieved from Spiridion's grave settle Sand's and many of her contemporaries' grievances against the Church, but they also shine a light on this believer's path to a kinship with God, with fellow human beings and nature itself. Sand's renunciation of Catholicism led her not to abandon the ideals of Christianity, but to make space for those in an inclusive spiritual life. The importance of this unique and remarkable book lies less in this conclusion than in the protagonists' journey towards the realisation that truth itself is above all a sincerity of heart and mind and therein lies the fulfilment of our humanity. There is no expiry date on this wisdom.

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