

**Island Heart, poems by Ida Faubert,
translated by Danielle Legros Georges
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Review by Denise Provost

Translating poetry, perhaps even more than writing poetry, is a labor of love. It is also a prickly intellectual and linguistic task, posing unanswerable questions at every turn. Not just each line of poetry, but every word presents a judgement call; each poem a series of seemingly impossible choices.

The English-speaking world is fortunate that esteemed poet Danielle Legros Georges took on the work of selecting and translating this collection of poems by Ida Faubert. Familiarity with Faubert's poetry might otherwise have remained confined to readers in France and in Haiti, the countries where Faubert lived and wrote. We would be the poorer for it, unaware of this remarkable poet, writing in a literary milieu dominated by men.

Legros Georges, in her Translator's Notes and Biography sections, provides background on this "complex literary figure. Bicultural, biracial, and privileged, she neither easily fit socially prescribed categories for women of color in France or Haiti nor conformed to them." Faubert's first collection of poems, *Coeur des îles* (Island Heart) was published in 1939, when Faubert was 57, and received a prestigious award.

Though the Modernist and Symbolist movements in French poetry were already underway in the 19th century, and Surrealist poetry launched in the early 20th, Faubert charted her own chosen poetic course. She did not partake of the fashions of the best-known French male poets of her day. As Legros Georges points out, "Faubert wrote in a literary style that was not contemporaneous to her time, borrowing heavily from a 19th century Romantic aesthetic."

Faubert's subject matter comes from the playbook of the Romantic movement. She portrays the lush natural world as filled with activity: palm trees and flowers dream, plants and bees shiver, sunlight gives kisses, the sun itself goes up in flames. In this charged milieu, Faubert describes emotion at its extremes: delight, desire, love, pleasure, fear, grief, suffering, despair.

Rendering rhymed forms from other languages into English is a full challenge by itself. Legros Georges herself confesses that she is at times "frustrated" by Faubert's artistic sensibilities. Yet she is deeply respectful of the content of Faubert's work, and clearly hesitant to offer us translations which would go over the top for modern tastes; her ultimate choice is to render Faubert's "poems in as natural a free-verse and 21st century U.S. English as possible."



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What Legros Georges achieves with her translations is a dignified restraint. Through it, the pure essence of Faubert's language and sentiment is allowed to shine. Consider this middle quatrain from "Soir Tropical/Tropical Night":

*Les jasmins ont mêlé leurs branches étoilées
Aux lianes en fleur. L'haleine de l'été
Caresse les fruits lourds. La grave volupté
Laisse trainer son voile au détour des allées.*

All four lines of this stanza end with the same rhyming sound. The first and last lines have an internal rhyme of the same sound folded in, the two middle lines have a different internal rhyme. This kind of verbal virtuosity would give any translator pause.

*Legros Georges, up to the task, gives us this sensitive rendering:
The jasmine have mixed their star-studded branches
With lianas in bloom. Summer's breath
Caresse the heavy fruit. The dense sensuality
Lets its long veil linger along the sinuous paths.*

The insistence of Faubert's frequent repetition of sounds is abandoned. What we get instead the whispering slant rhyme of branches and paths at the ends of the first and last lines, the soft rhyming of bloom and fruit internally in the two middle lines. Audible to a bilingual reader will be the detail that, although Legros Georges doesn't make the same words rhyme internally in these middle lines, she recreates these rhymes in almost the same place where they occur in the original – homage indeed.

There are those who consider that tightly constructed verse forms are the best containers for strong emotions. Faubert clearly thought so, and employed sonnets, rondels, chansons, and other highly controlled models of expression in her writing. Legros Georges takes the risk entailed in deconstructing Faubert's forms; what she achieves is a tenderness, a delicate rendering of emotional states that could otherwise come across as overwrought, even bombastic.

For instance, "Mon Amour, Attendez/Wait, My Love" is a poem of five quatrains, with three stanzas of ABBA rhyme schemes packed between first and last stanzas in which each line ends with the same sound. Legros Georges digs into this tour de force of form, and uncovers the emotional heart of the poem. The first two stanzas express well the tone and direction that she takes:

*When you forget that you held me
Captive in your arms, like a thing that was yours
When you grow tired of my sweet love
Wait until night falls to tell me.
Then you won't see my undone face
My sorry eyes, my trembling mouth.
The dark will veil my crushing sorrow.
Wait until night falls completely....*

Legros Georges recreates this poem with great fidelity to Faubert's

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original, employing just occasional mild end rhymes, yet this poem's disarming simplicity retains its deep feeling. Each of these poems rings true, whether playful, joyful, filled with sadness and loss, or coming from an unanticipated angle, as in Faubert's "A Ma Muse/to My Muse."

This direct address to Faubert's muse is poised between teasing her ("If you want me to follow you still/Lose your distress call to the distance....") and an effort to cheer her up with such blandishments as

lilacs for her hair, and pink almond blossoms. Ultimately, it is an impassioned exhortation to her muse – and so to herself:

*With amazed eyes look closely at Life!
Speak all desire, and all precious hopes.
Speak all wishes of unsatisfied souls
Sing of abandon in the splendor of nights.*

We are fortunate to have Legros Georges as Faubert's muse of translation for *Island Heart*. That Faubert's soul is undoubtedly satisfied with the way this translation speaks and sings her powerfully yearning songs to us. Though we live in another land, in another age, these poems strike the notes of our hearts with perfect pitch.

In 2021, the New England Poetry Club (NEPC) gave its Golden Rose Award to bilingual poet Rhina Espaillat, born in the Dominican Republic, on the other side of the island of Hispaniola from Haiti. Because the award ceremony was held on Zoom, Espaillat and poet Lloyd Schwartz were able to conduct a dialogue about translation, which they consider not just an art, but a moral imperative – and an undertaking which is "impossible." The multi-lingual and multi-talented Legros Georges would probably agree with both propositions – but by melding her own island heart with Faubert's, she has achieved in this book an inspired equivalence.