Taming the Elephant

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Robert Alan Jamieson continues the discussion, begun in NNow # 8, of dilemmas about translation for writers who choose to write in minority languages.

The State of Scots

In the first essay ‘To Bed with an Elephant’, address issues around translation as they affect Gaelic poets and which resonate with us writers of Scots. The key difference, perhaps, is that in the case of Scots it is less easy to see where Elephant ends and bedfellow begins. Scots and English shade into one another – part of a complex spectrum of language which rounds the North Sea. Whereas cousins across the water, just as distinct from neighbours, achieved ‘language’ status centuries ago, Scots struggled to reach such a state of grace. Its current situation is both parlous and hopeful – parlous in that it appears ever more diluted by anglicisation and globalisation; hopeful in that rather than being, as once, popularly anglicised and globalised; hopeful in language’ status. There is a sense of cultural marginalisation, the relationship between Scots and ‘the Elephant’ is markedly different from that of Gaelic. Many English people understand Scots – north eastern English dialects particularly have much in common with the southern forms of Scots, reminding us that the old kingdom of Northumbria reached from Forth to Humber, that it was to the south of Humber the land of the Angles began, and that traffic and trade across the border is both ancient and everyday. A quick look at the work of Bill Griffiths, for instance, will confirm this sense that the forms of West Germanic found on the east coast of Britain do not nearly fit the current political map. There are many specific examples I could quote, but a favourite one of mine is the word ‘hair’. In my adopted home of Edinburgh, people take a certain pride in naming the North Sea fog thus, as if it was specifically an Edinburgh (or Leith) phenomenon. But it is a word used as far north as Shetland and, according to the OED, as far south as the Humber. Another example comes from a small pamphlet of Yorkshire dialect writing I picked up years ago. I was amazed at the title – ‘Cum thee Wic’ – which I recognised immediately as ‘Kum de wiv’ (‘come this way’) from the tongue of Shetland. The contents too seemed very familiar.

So it is a complicated picture. Even the name ‘Scots’ is potentially misleading, for as we know the Scots themselves were originally Celtic and not Germanic, and the term firstly referred to Scottish Gaelic. While one of the distinguishing factors between Scots and the other West Germanic tongues is that many Gaelic loan words and phrases, it is relatively easy for the language we now call Scots to blend into English – too easy, some might say. The danger of ‘false friends’, or ‘negative transference’ is great, where the same root word has evolved different meanings over time. Compared with Gaelic, it is not so easy to distinguish Scots, to maintain a ‘forked tongue’ as W.N. Herbert calls it. In the work of writers such as Kathleen Jamie or Don Paterson, we find a quieter voice inhabiting their predominantly English language work, rather in the manner that the voice of Orkney inhabits the work of George Mackay Brown – the occasional word amongst an otherwise English text, perhaps the odd idiom translated to give the feel of Scots. As a result, the need to translate into English is less pressing – in many cases a small glossary is quite sufficient.

But in my own case, or that of my native tongue, the picture is different. I come from the most northern part of the Scots world, and grew up speaking a very distinctive form with considerable North Germanic (Scandinavian) elements, even 500 hundred years after the transfer of political power from Copenhagen to Edinburgh. Shetland’s long history of North Sea trade with speakers of Dutch, Frisian, and Low Saxon is also a factor. Distinctiveness for the Shetlander is not an issue. The problem is more what to do with those parts of the local tongue that do not fit neatly into the English or the Scots alphabet, particularly the ‘Scandinavian vowels’ as they were once termed by the education authorities - but these issues I have written about elsewhere, and lie beyond the remit of this essay.7 I should mention, however, the vital work of the late John J. Graham in the 20th century, the key figure in giving the Shetland tongue the same authoritative credibility described earlier in relation to Scots as a whole.8

Translation: visibility and enrichment

Visibility is a difficulty for any writer, if they are not at all bothered about their work being read. In situations where the medium is a smaller tongue isolated by a larger, where the media is largely conducted in a ‘foreign’ language, this difficulty is obviously magnified. I recall an interview with the Faroese poet Róí Patursön, winner of the Nordic Council’s prize for literature in 1986, where he bemoaned the fact that Faroese writers had a maximum of some 48,000 readers. At the time I thought this substantial, but of course not all the people of Faroe read poetry. And the point is linguistic isolation, not poetic. The ‘minority’ writer is invisible to a world which does not know how to decode and so cannot recognise the merits of the work. A true poet may well make poetry whether anyone reads it or not, but we are entitled to ask, after Derrida, whether it is fully writing if no one reads it. And so, for the writer working in a so-called minority language, translation takes on much greater importance. The irony is, perhaps, that the very Elephant that threatens to squash its smaller bedfellow, can also be the beast that helps transport. For the Elephant has a back so broad it can be a ‘bridge’ language that carries little us to distant others – others like ourselves, marginal and isolated from an Elephantine viewpoint. And to use the English as a beast of burden is perhaps a kind of revenge for being long-squashed; a tool to increased interaction and propagation of minority language via translation. This, I suggest, is payback for centuries of cultural imperialism – the revenge of the bedfellow. But here I must add that this Elephant has been, to me, a marvellous crutch, has carried me as reader from steppe to dust bowel, from old world to new, from saga to haika. While I do not wish to be swallowed by it, I am grateful to it. My own first experience of translation was into English. It grew out of a friendship made at the Scottish Universities International Summer School in 1989, in ‘Soviet times’. Volodomyr Dibrova had something he wanted to show people ‘in the west’ – that Ukrainian literature existed – and I fell into line, working the literals he provided into the target language – English – for Edinburgh Review11. One thing he explained to me was the iconic place of the letter ‘ъ’ in Ukrainian, for it was this symbol that most distinctively marked Ukrainian from Russian – which reminded me of the non-English graphs in my Shetlandic work. And I consider this approach apposite for Scots generally, as one feature of Scots which distinguishes it from the southern Elephant is that whereas English lost the sound once represented by the graph ‘ъ’ centuries ago – a short ‘ъ’ – Scots did not; so that MacDiarmid’s famous line, for instance, might be represented as: ‘I’ll hae haufwaa hoose.’12 Following this work with Volodymyr Dibrova, I was approached to work with Nadia Kjurik on a Ukrainian feature for Northwords Now focusing on Yevgen Pashkovski.13 I later worked on a similar project with Liv Schei, on a novel from the Danish, and out of all this a habit developed – I got to like the process. And about this time I began to translate myself – that is, began to make bi-lingual text. I realise now in doing so I was recognising that the child inside me had been translating ever since starting school in Shetland in 1963. In 1989, those Ukrainian translations were a political act – anti-Soviet and the translations I began to make of my own work had that tenor to me. They were statements – notifications - of existence in English. I aimed for redress – if not equivalence then at least a relation, a speaking-to-
Translation is kindness to creation, but dif- ferent in that it begins with reading whereas creation ends with it. Translation responds to the original by freeing it as a mutable thing, where density of allusion and ambiguity is far greater than in speech or prose writing, must inevitably be misrepresented in ‘trans- position’. But then poetry, one might argue, lies in the active attempt at understanding, not graphs, and translation at best is exactly that.

Reading poetry is difficult enough in one’s native tongue – the very nature of it resists the intelligence, almost successfully, as Wallace Stevens phrased it. A translation is always partial, a subjective reading, a response to a call, to some appeal for what is untranslatable. Translation is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one system of signs into another, eg from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting.”

This distinction between translation and transposition is hierarchical – the presence of the word ‘only’ suggests the latter is in- ferior. In ‘transposing’ a poem interlingually, something less than ‘translation’ takes place. The person responsible is at best a ‘trans- poser’ – which has an amusing if accidental positive connotation, in its association with the French loan, ‘poser’. The implication is that we are fooling ourselves if we imagine otherwise.

The text, to the structuralist, is the text is the text – a fact, or series of facts, ink marks on paper. But what is contained there, especially in the case of poetry, is something other, something allusive and elusive, even in the original - a complex of sound, image and idea, within an architecture, if we follow Pound’s following of A. T. Marsack. As different languages encode different world views, different ways of thinking about ex- perience, so replication is impossible. “A word is a microcosm of human conscious- ness,” as Lev Semyonovich Vygonsky wrote. Poetry, which makes such use of the multi- plicity and the associative power of words, of researched essays and reviews of books or events which merit specialised attention. We also aim to be accessible to a wide (mainly English-speaking) readership. We have a 7000 print run per issue and the fact that we are, nationally, ‘free’ makes it easy for us to place NNNow with stockists across Scotland; and for them to be able to report on high rate of uptake.

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Anyone wishing to have more information, or wanting to submit material for possi- ble publication should write to the General Editor at Northwords Now, PO Box 5706, INVERNESS. IV1 9AF. It will be passed on to the Gaelic Editor.

Rhoda Michael
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