Taming the Elephant

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The State of Scots

Matthew Carmichael, in his essay ‘To Bed with an Elephant’, addresses 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 bedfellows begin. 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 indistinct 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 misconceived of as the ‘broken’ version of Imperial English spoken north of the border, there is increased understanding both at home and abroad that it too has justifiable claim to ‘language’ status – as recognised, finally, by the resumed Scottish parliament.

The academic work of the last century is vital and impressively – the Scottish National Dictionary, produced between 1931 and 1976 under the editorship of firstly William Grant and latterly David Murdoch, set out to represent the full spectrum of Scottish vocabulary, and its single volume spin-off helped publicise the richness of the Scots tongue. In the 80s Billy Kay provided a popular yet informative assessment of both the history and late 20th situation and, William Donaldson’s research illuminated an overlooked area, the widespread use of the Itchy Coo project is providing books for children that have proved – surprisingly, to many doubters – genuinely popular. 2003 saw the publication of The Edinburgh Companion to Scots, an important benchmark, a work which further underlined this new-found status, and in 2004 a team at Dundee University digitised the full text of all ten volumes of the SND and made them available free via the Dictionary of the Scots Language site.

The pluralistic approach employed in these key works, recording historical and geographical variants, shows Scots to be a very broad kirk, reaching from Shetland to Ulster, encompassing urban and rural – a ‘pluricentric diasystem’. The question of a fixed or standard orthography, for so long a sore issue, now appears less pressing in the postmodern era. Variations co-exist – indeed, it is a happy thing that they should. Despite the obvious parallel experience of 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 ‘haur’. 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 - ‘Cumi thee Wee’ – which I recognised immediately as ‘Kum de we’i’ (‘come this way’) from the tongue of Shetland. The contents too seemed very far-far.

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 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, 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.

The question of a ‘pluricentric diasystem’. The key figure in giving the Shetland tongue the same authoritative credibility described earlier in relation to Scots as a whole.

Translation: visibility and enrichment

Visibility is a difficulty for any writer, if they are 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 Rún Paterson, 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 Faroese 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 for 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 a much greater importance. The irony is, perhaps, that the very Elephant that threatens to squash its smaller bedfellows, 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.

“Translation responds to the original by freeing it as a mutable thing, a complex of encoded ideas and associations not merely to be admired, but transmutated, necessarily rearranged. It is, in effect, a kind of Re-Creative Writing.”

Robert Alan Jamieson continues the discussion, begun in NNow # 8, of dilemmas about translation for writers who choose to write in minority languages.
Translation is kindred 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, a complex of encoded ideas and associations not merely to be admired, but transmuted, not merely to be admired, but reinterpreted. This is, in effect, a kind of 'Re-Creative Writing'. So the translator and the creator are not so far apart – indeed the essential semantic instability of any text, dependent on the subjectivity of the reader, suggests that translation is not such a different tuning from the kind of necessary interpretation made by a reader in their native language.

Ah, but poetry – it is often said – is untranslatable, an idea sometimes attributed to Coleridge and the elevated Romantic sentiment of the poetic art his work helped to engender. But it is an ancient thought, and in more recent times we find Roman Jakobson taking it up: ‘Poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape to another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic 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 inferior. In ‘transposing’ a poem interlingually, something less than ‘translating’ takes place. The person responsible is at best a ‘transposer’ – which has an amusing if accidental negative 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 Aristotle. As different languages encode different world views, different ways of thinking about experience, so replication is impossible. ‘A word is a microcosm of human consciousness,’ as Lev Semenovich Vygotsky... wrote. Poetry, which makes such use of the munificacy and the associative power of words, where density of allusion and ambiguity is far greater than in speech or prose writing, must inevitably be misrepresented in ‘transposition’. 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 felt in the original, but if the thing that is made is genuinely responsive, based on deep understanding of the original, the ‘transposition’ may itself attain the state of being poetic. Poetry is not, then, simply what is lost in translation, as Robert Frost once famously remarked – it is also, potentially, what is found. And if all translations fail to make different things alike, that is simply inevitable.

Untranslatability is part of translation as Jacques Derrida once said: ‘... there is no experience of translation when we don’t experience the untranslatable ... it is absolutely linked to the idiom, to the extent that the idiom is not translatable that the translation translates the untranslatable. That’s why literature is the experience of translation, is what calls for translation. To write a poem, an untranslatable poem, calls for translation. The poem cries for being translated precisely because it can’t be. That’s why we try and translate Hölderlin and Milton and Mallarmé, and we know that they are not translatable. But that’s why the untranslatability is not a negative concept. It’s not opposed to translatability. Untranslatability is the element of translation.’...

The difficulty is intrinsic to the process – as being elephantine is a condition of being an Elephant. And however oppressed we native speakers of Gaelic or Scots may have been by being educated in English, we are at least fluent in one of the world’s great languages – not the case with all minority language speakers. So we should use this to our advantage – by taming the Elephant, become ‘moulded’, and guide it to where we want to go. We should endeavour actively to direct it, and not lie passively abed awaiting the crush. And that is just what we are doing. Waithios Caanbeul and myself, in using it as vehicle for this Gaelic/Scots exchange.

Notes
1. www.ddl.ac.uk
4. The Language of the People William Donaldson, 1989
5. But n Ben A-Go-Go, 2000
6. www.itchy-coo.com
7. The Edinburgh Companion to Scots, eds. John Corbett; Derrick McClure; Jane Stuart-Smith
8. A Dictionary of North East Dialect, 2002
12. in A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, 1926
13. Index on Censorship, 3/1993
15. for information on and examples of translation into Scots, see European Poetry in Scotland: An Anthology of Translations, ed. Peter France and Duncan Glen, 1989
18. discussion of logopoeia, phonopoea, and melopoeia in How to Read, 1931
22. Rhoda Michael (aka Rhoda Dunbar) Editor NNow

New Gaelic Writing at Northwords Now

Northwords Now occupies some- thing not unlike the place previ- ously occupied by the Magazine Northwords which was published out of Dingwall from 1991 till 2004.

What do we mean by ‘North’? Our inter- ests are wide-ranging. They extend beyond a fixed geographical location. We’ve had a featured review of 20thc.Russian poetry; an essay on Margaret Tait, Orkney poet and film-maker; have used images from Inuit art and the work of over 20 contemporary European poets into my version of Shetlandic Scots. In each case I learned something about my native tongue as a consequence.

Yet translation is no simple business – it is, and always has been, fraught with the is- sues of correspondence how can two essen- tially different things be made alike?

Re-Creative Writing

We might argue that the original process of creating in language is just this a process of translation, in its broadest sense, of mood or feeling or idea or observation into thought- words, then those into writing – then fol- lows ‘translation’ from draft to draft until alchemy, the energy has led to something magical. All that making in the workshop has created something, we hope: the en- coding of meaning; an event in semantics, and perhaps publishing – we hope: The en- ergy of composition has, ideally, crystallized something to be treasured – even festishized: ‘The Definitive Text’.

However, publication and its core notion of ‘deadline’ do not always coincide with completion. Writers may be hurried towards it, the published text may be incomplete. It may be the victim of careless publishing, littered with typographical errors. The ‘defini- tive’ is not really, then, a thing that resides in any of the editions or revisions – it is not made of text at all. It is in the author’s mind, an ideal aspired to, and, on rare oc- casion, blissfully achieved The ‘made thing’, that fixed identity in words – the event in published language – emerges out of flux, and stops the creative process, sometimes drastically.

To date most of what we have published has been unsolicited. Some wonderful surprises come our way.

We are a magazine where creative writ- ing can be published. The ties of the writing or the writer to the north may be close or not. We look for ‘high quality’, by which we mean something which is satisfying, which is free from discrimination and experience. We have a sound reviews section and seek informed and lively reviewers. And we have a fea- tures section which is evolving into a mix 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, naturally, ‘free’ makes it easy for us to place NNow with stockists across Scotland; and for them to be able to report on high rate of uptake.

We get messages from readers saying how they have enjoyed it.

We have to date, something GAELIC in every issue: poetry, a schools project (Plockton/Sorley), and 6 excellent poetry collections to review. And now we have begun to engage with enhancing our Gaelic writers, to formalise a Gaelic policy.

We are being supported and encouraged by HIE with HI-Arts in this enterprise.

Northwords Now is published three times yearly. The Autumn issue is planned for 1st November ‘08; the Spring issue for 1st March ’09. It is planned that there will be a Gaelic Editor in place for these 2 issues. This person will be keen to receive submis- sions of new creative Gaelic writing, of sug- gestions for essays or features on matters that are issues ‘now’ for Gaelic writers.

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.