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 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 indistinct from neighbours, achieved ‘language’ status centuries ago, Scots struggled to reach such a state of grace. Its current 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 neatly 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 familiarity of the title – ‘Cum thee Wis’ – which I recognised immediately as ‘Kum de wis’ (‘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 Celt 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 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 Scots 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.1 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.2

**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 obvious magnified. I recall an interview with the Faroese poet Rói Patursson, 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 a 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 creature; has carried me as reader from stepe to dustbowl, from old world to new; from saga to haiku. 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’. Volodynmr Dibrova had something he wanted to show people ‘in the west’ – that Ukrainian literature existed – and I fell into line, working the literalts he provided into the target language – English – for Edinburgh Review.3 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 ‘a’ – Scots did not; so that MacDiarmid’s famous line, for instance, might be represented as: “I’ll hae nae haufwee hone’e”.4

Following this work with Volodynmr Dibrova, I was approached to work with Nadia Kjukirn on a Ukrainian feature for Index or Ordnings, focusing on Yegevn Pashkov’ski.5 I later worked on a similar basis with Liv Schei, on a novel from the Danash, 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 bilingual text. I realise now in doing so I was recognising that the child inside me had being 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 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,
accesorily rearranged. It is, in effect, a kind
of ‘Re-Creative Writing’. So the translator
and the creator are not so far apart – in-
deed the essential semantic instability of
any text, dependent on the subjectivity of
the reader, suggests that translation is not such
a difference stemming from the kind of necessary
interpretation made by a reader in their na-
tive language.

Ah, but poetry – it is often said – is
untranslatable, an idea sometimes attributed
to Coleridge and the elevated Romantic
image of the poetic art his work helped
to engender. But it is an ancient thought,
and in more recent times we find Roman
Jakobsen taking it up: ‘Poetry by definition
is untranslatable. Only creative transposition
is possible: either intralingual transposition –
from one poetic shape to another, or inter-
lingual transposition – from one language
into another, or finally intersensitive trans-
position – from one system of signs into an-
other, eg from verbal art into music, dance,
cinema or painting’.”17

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 ‘translates’ takes place.
The person responsible is at best a ‘trans-
poser’ – which has an amusing if accidental
flairness, 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, es-
cpecially 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.18 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 Vygotsky19 wrote.
Poetry, which makes such use of the m use-
cality 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 ‘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 Stevens20 phrased it. A translation
is always partial, a subjective reading, a response
to a call, to some appeal felt in the origi-
nal, but if that the thing is made is genuinely
responsive, based on deep understanding
of the original, the ‘transposition’ may itself at-
tain the state of being poetic. Poetry is not,
then, simply what is lost in translation, as
Robert Frost once famously remarked – it
also, potentially, what is found. And if all
translations fail to make different things
like, that is simply inevitable.

Untranslatability is part translation as Jacques Derrida once said: “…there is no ex-
perience of translation when we don’t experience the untranslatable … it’s abso-
lutely linked to the idiom, to the extent that
the idiom is not translatable that the trans-
lation 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 transla-
tion. 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 untranslat-
ability is not a negative concept. It’s not op-
posed to translatability. Untranslatability is
the element of translation.”21

The difficulty is intrinsic to the process
– as being elephantine is a condition of be-
ing an Elephant. And however oppressed we
native speakers of Greek 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.

We should use this to our advantage
– by taming the Elephant, become ‘mahout’,
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. 

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Rhoda Michael
(aka Rhoda Dunbar)
Editor NNow

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