Taming the Elephant

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The State of Scots

MAGNILO CASMBRETT, 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 end 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 imperative – the Scottish National Dictionary, produced between 1931 and 1976 under the editorship of firstly William Grant and latterly David Murison, 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, according to the OED, as far south as the Humber.

So it is a complicated picture. Even the term ‘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 its origin in a small pamphlet of Yorkshire dialect writing – I picked up years ago I was amazed at the title – ‘Cum te vice’ – which I recognised immediately as ‘Kum de wiv’ (‘come this way’) from the tongue of Shetland. The contents too seemed very familiar.

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 Rói Patrusson, 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 Faro 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 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 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 bedfellows. But here I must add that this Elephant has been, to me, a marvellous creature, has carried me as reader from steppe 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 – and the translations I began to make of my own work had that tenor to me. They were at all bothered about their work being translated. 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.

Robert Alan Jamieson continues the discussion, begun in NN # 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 idiom is not translatable, that the transla-
tion 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
must inevitably be misrepresented in ‘trans-
lation’. 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 at-
tain 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 translation as
Jacques Derrida once said: “…” There is no
experience of translation when we don’t
experience the untranslatable … it is 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 untransla-
tability is not a negative concept. It’s not op-
posed to translatability. Untranslatability is
the element of translation.”

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 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.

We should use this to our advantage
– by taming the Elephant, become ‘mauhot’,
and guide it to where we want to go. We
should endeavour actively to direct it, and
not lie passively averted awaiting the crash.
And that is just what we are doing, Maolios
Caambeul and myself, in using it as vehicle
for this Gaelic/Scotts exchange.