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

Matthew Caemfeul, 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 justifiably claim to ‘language’ status – as recognised, firstly, by the OED, as far south as 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 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 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 in 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 ‘neglectful 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 listening – a voice which I recognise immediately as ‘Kum de wis’ (“come this way”) from the tongue of Shetland. The contents too seemed very familiar.

Visibility is a difficulty for any writer, if they are 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 Patursen, 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 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 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’. Volodymyr Dibrova had something he wanted to show people ‘in the west’ – that Ukrainian literature existed – and I fell into line, working the literal provided into the target language – English – for Edinburgh Review. One thing he explained to me was the iconic place of the letter ‘i’ 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 English Elephant is that whereas English lost the sound once represented by the graph ‘ae’ centuries ago – a short ‘a’ – Scots did not; so that MacDharmid’s famous line, for instance, might be represented as: “T’lue rue haufwee hose.”

Following this work with Volodymyr Dibrova, I was approached to work with Nadia Kjurik on a Ukrainian feature for Index on Censorship, focusing on Yevgen Pashkovski. I later worked on a similar basis 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, to begin making bilingual text. I realised 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 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,
moreover with the help of the body of
literature written in that form — a means of
enrichment. So far, as a result of LAF;
I’ve translated — via these Elephants – the
work of over 20 contemporary European
critics for my version of Scottish 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
issue 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
felling or idea or observation into thought-
words, then those into writing — then fol-
lorew ‘translation from draft to draft until
alchemical process has ideally, crystallized
something to be 'treasured — even festished:
‘The Definitive Text’.

However, publication and its core notion
of ‘deadline’ do not always coincide with
completeness. Writers may be hurried towards
it, the published text may be incomplete. It
may be the victim of careless publishing, lit-
ter with typographical errors. The ‘defini-
tive’ is not really, then, a thing that resides
in the original — a complex of sound, im-
ager and idea, within an architecture, if we
follow Pound’s following of Aritotle. 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 Semenovich Vygotsky8 wrote.
Poetry, which makes such use of the muf-
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 Stevens12 phrased it. A translation
is always partial, a subjective reading, a re-
ponse to a call, to some appeal felt in the origi-
nal, but if the thing that is made is genuinely
responsive, based on deep understanding of
the original, the ‘transposition’ may itself at-
test 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
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 intersemiotic trans-
position — from one system of signs into an-
other, eg, from verbal art into music, dance,
cinema or painting.”13

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
connotation, in its association with the
French loan, ‘poseur’. 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-
pecially in the case of poetry, is something
other, something allusive and elusive, even
in the original — a complex of sound, im-
age 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 ex-
perience, so replication is impossible. “A
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1926
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workshop held in Shetland in 2005
was published by the award-winning
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16. for information on and examples of
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