

NOTAS

THE MODERN TRANSLATOR'S ART

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Translation cannot reproduce an original. In *Dichtung und Wahrheit* Goethe declared that at its best a translation might produce a new work, a substitute for some original, but only rarely has his ideal been approached, e.g. Gavin Douglas's *Eneydos* of 1513 was a new poem, created out of Virgil's epic into 16th-century Scots.¹ In our own time G.L. Bickersteth's translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia* into *terza rima*² has emerged as a revitalization of the master's inspiration. Its author admitted, however, that he could not 'become a Dante' so that he had to ask Dante 'to become him' and it is obvious that Bickersteth's version does not read like an 'English' poem. Very few English poets have been able to sustain triple rhyme and when a translator succeeds to such a remarkable degree we are indeed in the presence of a new work. This is especially true of the *Paradiso*:

I had already fixed on him my sight;
and he, uplifting breast and forehead, made
as he were holding hell in great despite³

refers to Farinata's proud contempt for Hell, though he is damned as one of the Heretics in the Sixth Circle. A line rendered as

O light supreme, so far above the wit
of man exalted⁴

from the *Inferno*, is another instance of how close Bickersteth comes to the dignity and 'grand style' of this most translated of poets, but it is the transmutation of the triple rhyme from one language to another which raises Bickersteth above Sayers and indeed any other translator of Dante except possibly Binyon.

Bickersteth considered that verse-translation was a *useful* art, a pastime for scholars rather than for poets, but it must be said there are many categories of translation. Those intended strictly for commercial or for academic purposes are not works of art. How could they be, when the original is erected as a target and some pre-arranged formula applied as a yardstick? Gregory the Great, and before him Horace, preferred a free rendering, and when Douglas started his translation of the *Aeneid* he resolved to take their advice and not attempt a word-for-word exercise. He based his argument on the poverty of his native language in comparison with Virgil's Latin and said that he had other choice but to borrow wholesale from vulgar Latin, French and English when no satisfactory domestic equivalent existed.⁵

Douglas was dealing in both old and new words, many of which were soon to drop out of use or had already become archaic, and his *Eneydos* into Scots was doomed to become, sadly, a museum-piece, though more recent estimates of its worth, such as that of C.S. Lewis, are high.⁶ Lewis suggested⁷ that Douglas's Scots captured Virgil's Latin to the life, and represented a feat of recreation which post-Renaissance translations, governed by cold, austere, non-classical ideals could not hope to emulate. Take, for example, an earthy passage such as this one from the Sixth Book:

The cartaris smate thar horssis fast in teyn
With renyeys slakkyt, and swete drepan bedeyn⁸

which pictures the Virgilian characters as though they were 16th century peasants, is certainly lacking in 'high seriousness', the essential quality which humanist tradition has insisted great poetry ought to possess. Lewis set Douglas far above Dryden as a translator of Virgil because the former was not a slave to the 'grand style'. Surrey's translations from Books II and IV owe a great deal to Douglas but Surrey's are more in the nature of English versions of the Latin originals, being more precise and compressed than Douglas's; the Scotsman's eight lines

Quhat thocht thou now, Dydo, seand thir thingis?
Quhou many sobbys gave thou and womentyngis
Quhen thou, out of thi castell from the hycht,
The large costis beheld thus at a sycht
Ourspred with Trojany, in fervent bissyness
Can spedely for thar vayage addres,
And of thar clamour befor thine eyn dyd se
Dyn and resounding al the large see?⁹

is turned by Surrey into four

Beholding this, what thought might Dido have?
What sighes gave she? when from her towers hye

The large coasts she saw haunted with Troyans workes,
And in her sight the seas with din confounded.¹⁰

more emphatically but much less warmly.

The English tradition of literary translation insists on both philological and cultural sensitiveness, on the principle that to rely on either one without attending to the other results in dehumanisation or in anachronism. English philologists from Sweet and Chambers to Wyld and Wrenn have supported the literary critics. To quote from Wrenn's study 'Word and Symbol';

We now suffer from a kind of narrowing compartmentalism in which 'philology' (a term now declining in use) has come to be limited to only one of its branches, that of linguistic technique; and 'grammar', which once meant the art of writing well (*ars grammatica*) has become little more than either writing or speaking according to 'what's correct', or a set of rules for making structures in accordance with the patterns and 'prosodies' of a given language. We have the popular notion, on the one hand, of 'correctness' and on the other those most influential landmarks in the history of linguistic science produced by Bloomfield and Chomsky.¹¹

Philology then, is both a science and an art, two components which unite in the translating process necessary for understanding. Whatever we do with a literature in a language not our own, or in an older version of our language, whether we edit texts, write commentaries, study dialects, compose critical essays on its symbolism, translation is basic. It is not to be evaded. We must find equivalent for words, phrases, passages and still encounter the humanist's ancient dilemma, word-for-word or free. The 'exact verbal meaning' approach assumes that the worth of the original lies in the word-play of the original passage and this model is thought of not as a whole but as being fragmentary. Dictionary meanings and grammatical constructions are followed and imitated with a strictly utilitarian object to make it possible for the reader to understand a work in a language of which he knows little or nothing. Most commercial translations fall into this category and they stand or fall on their efficiency. Unfortunately, too many of them fall — this is especially true of English versions of Russian novels which until recently have been poor reflections of their models and vary between inaccuracy (of language) and incompetence (caused by cultural ignorance). The gap is almost impassible in the case of Japanese, which is extremely difficult to render into literary English (or any other European language for that matter). Japanese verse, especially the classical *tanka* and *haiku*, is virtually untranslatable and for a number of reasons too complex to explain here,¹² Japanese prose and drama resist transposition into other languages. The fact that much of it is available in the West¹³ is due to the influence of Arthur Waley and his many followers — in particular to post-Second World War students of Japanese. Yet none of these renderings, excellent as they are, can be more than weak substitutes. Waley

himself had to contend with enormous difficulties and frequently resorted to interpretations in order to bridge gaps or achieve some viable compromise with his original.

A utilitarian approach demands prose translation of verse. These generally result in monotony because prose idioms are more conventional than those of verse so that poetic repetitions contain an excessive number of words. This tendency to verbosity reduces the communicative possibilities of verse through emphasis and cadence. Alliteration and rhyme contribute to and are part of the meaning but in prose they fade and are forgotten. The fact that poetry cannot be reproduced is not a matter of distance or of time; nor can tone be repeated with any precision. It is best to show that the translator understands the exact sense and is conveying the irreducible prose content. Occasionally it is right and proper to translate, provided that the sense be not affected. The Middle English *assayed good auntere*¹⁴ is an idiom which has to be rendered as 'they have got off lightly', i.e. on that particular occasion, and exclamations like *bi God!* are more appropriately turned as 'Good heavens!', a much milder-sounding expletive.

Translation into good modern English is an examination exercise required of all students of foreign languages. Proponents of a mechanical theory of this process claim that perfection is possible, theoretically, at least. This is not true, but the attitude certainly does govern examinations wherein the aim of the translator is to demonstrate under pressure (a) that he knows the modern meanings of the given foreign words and phrases, including idiomatic usage, (b) that he can maintain a stylistically constant level and not confuse old-fashioned expressions with modern ones and (c) that he is capable of perceiving the original in its *historical* context. This type of translation is rooted in the glossarial equivalents which editors provide or which the candidate has discovered in dictionaries. It is literal and idiomatic, depending on current idioms — 14th-century English is not to be mixed up with modern English. 'Drunk as a mouse'¹⁵ has to become 'drunk as a lord' and 'worth his ears' should be given as 'worth his salt'. But 'by Christ!' in Modern English has a cruder force than it had in Chaucer's day — 'in Christ's name' or 'by all that's holy' is better and retains the historical context. 'By Jove', a modern interpretation, would be much less acceptable in this case.

Editorial glossing, obviously, may mislead. A glossary may be 'full', that is, all possible meanings may be supplied and these instances related to the place in the text where they occur; alternatively, a rough-and-ready guide to meaning may be given and the student encouraged to work out all the implications and to consider the context. Where the glossary is wrong and its authority remains unquestioned, as was the case with W.W. Skeat's edition of *Piers Plowman* (1885)¹⁶ which remained the standard for the best part of a century, a proliferation of 'howlers' is inevitable. Now, with greater application and reference to the *OED*, Skeat can be challenged. In fairness to him, it must be said that he lacked modern advantages and up-to-date references and, all things considered, put up a most creditable performance.

The most famous example of mistranslation based on Skeat's glossing is taken from line 2 of the *Prologue*:

In a somer seson, when soft was the sonne,
I shope me in shroudes as I a *shepe* were ...

which the editor informs us is 'shepherd'. He thought that the line meant 'I dressed myself in clothes as if I were a sheperd', *i.e.* 'I put on sheperd's clothing'. Skeat added a note suggesting 'I put on (rough) clothes as if I were a shepherd'. However, both *NED* and *Ms* forms of the word attest a long vowel, *shépe* (sheep), not *shep* (shepherd). Skeat's note agrees that it often does mean 'sheep' and the line makes sense if *shépe* is turned by 'sheep'. 'I put on sheep's clothing ...' the Dreamer is speaking of the wolves in sheep's clothing and placing himself in the same category as the lazy louts referred to in line 55f who

clothedem hem in copes, to ben knowen fram othere
and shopen hem heremites, here ese to have

though in an examination exercise it is unlikely that the passage to be turned into 'good Modern English' (the conventional rubric) would extend to fifty-five lines. Hence the translator would have to draw attention to this later image in a note in order to make it quite clear that he grasped the full implications of 'sheep' in line 2.

Another illustration of Skeat's tendency to error is taken from *Passus VI*, lines 12-3;

tho were faitoures aferde, and feyned hem blynde
somme leyde here legges *aliri*, as suche loseles conneth

where the puzzle-word is *aliri*. Skeat thought it meant 'across' or 'loosely stretched out' (deriving it from the Old English *lira* — the fleshy portion of the leg or calf). Later editors and lexicographers, like Tolkien and Stratman, could not improve on this interpretation. Tolkien's glossary to Sisam's *Fourteenth-century Verse and Prose* informs us that *aliri* is an adverb meaning 'across one another (of legs)' and relates it to *lyre*, which Stratman in his *Middle English Dictionary* glossed as 'flesh, calves'. Our student then does his best to agree with these authorities and produces something like;

The lying rascals were afraid and pretended they
were blind. Some laid their legs across one another
(with the calf of one leg resting on the other) as such
good-for-nothing fellows know how to do.

However, common-sense criteria may urge him to ask why 'lying rascals' (by way of a parallel to pretending themselves blind) should get themselves into a contortionist's position. The image appears absurd. But if *aliri* is related, not to the Old English *lira* but to *lyre* 'loss, damage', a somewhat different picture begins to present itself.

Bosworth-Toller (1898 edn.) gives *limes lyre* as 'used of a person paralysed' and thus evidently implying 'injury to limbs'. The adjective *lyrig* means 'maimed' or 'paralysed' and the forms *a-lyrig* or *on-lyrig* would lead to the Middle English form *aliri*. Armed with this additional assistance, the translator is entitled to second thoughts, as follows:

Then lying rascals were afraid, and pretended they
were blind; some placed their legs in a position
that suggested injury or paralysis, as such good-
for-nothings know how to do.¹⁷

A second example of the applications of common-sense is to be found in *Prologue*, lines 80-3 where Langland explains;

Ac it is naught by the bischop . that the boy precheth
For the parisch prest and the pardoners . parten the silver
That the poraille of the parish . shoulde have, if they nere

Skeat thought that *by* meant 'against' and boy 'young fellow', both of which are accepted dictionary meanings. *Naught*, a substantive, means 'nothing' but Skeat glossed it as 'not'. So we start, following Skeat, with:

But it is not against the bishop's leave that the young
fellow preaches

The 'boy', according to the context, is the pardoner. So why should the pardoner preach against the bishop who issued his license? One must presume that the poet was not talking nonsense, so that the translation requires modification, perhaps as follows:

But what the young fellow preaches is nothing to the bishop

treating *that* as a relative rather than a conjunction. Still, is it likely that Langland called his pardoner a 'young fellow'? Pardoners were notorious symbols of graft in late-mediaeval literature and in real life also. Was there not another meaning of *boy*? Fortunately, there was and Skeat ought to have known it.¹⁸ In 14th-century English *boy* meant 'ruffian' as well as 'young fellow', so that a more reliable version may now be supplied:

But (*or* However) it is not by the bishop's leave that
 the ruffian preaches. (*or* What the ruffian preaches
 is of no concern to the bishop), for the parish priest
 and that pardoner split up the cash that the poor people
 of the parish ought to get, if it were not for the two
 of them.

Langland's tone is often rough, so that 'cash' is more suitable than *silver* here, just as 'money' is usually a more appropriate rendering of *gold*. The smallest gold coin at that time was a noble, worth a great deal and not the currency of the poorer classes. Phrases like *and geten gold with here glee* (*Prologue*, line 34) refers to minstrels or strolling players, so that here also 'money' or 'cash' is better — though the trendy 'bread' ought to be rejected since such a usage would be tonally inconsistent. An archaism, like *gold* or *silver* in this instance, or a blatant modern colloquialism, particularly if it be of American origin, would be equally out of place.

Another well-known example of misdirection by Skeat is found in the mock fable about the rats who bell the cat, a familiar story even in Langland's time. The poet was certainly aware of the topical allegory when he glossed *ritt* as 'moving about, running about';

When he *ritt* or rest . or renneth to playe

in *Prologue*, line 171. The subject is a cat but the allegory signifies a contemporary magnate such as John of Gaunt. *Ritt*, a contraction of *rideth*, means 'ride to war', as of a knight on horseback. The German *Ritter* — 'knight' has the same origin. To translate it as Skeat directs is weak and to offer 'rides' is absurd since the poet is describing the action of a cat. 'Moves into action' conveys the sense adequately.

So much for Langland. *Piers Plowman* and Skeat's edition of the B-text, has been a rich source of examples and one could find scores of them. Turning a passage of Middle into Modern English is a specialised exercise reserved for Honours candidates and a handful of scholars but the principles involved and the methods to be adopted are the same, whether the translator into English is using a mediaeval, a modern or even a classical source. English presents difficult problems because in that language the same word may have so many meanings, recognisable only in context or through vocal emphasis — Shakespeare's tragic speeches for example, are open to various interpretations according to vocal stress or verbal punctuation. A dramatic text in this respect resembles a musical score. Words like *cortayse*, *lewte* and *chivalrye*¹⁹ are not conveniently translated by their modern equivalents, 'courtesy', 'loyalty' and 'chivalry'. Even *love* — a single word for something which had many implications in Greek — has to be considered carefully in its context. Sometimes it may suggest praise or respect, as in the French *louer*.

A good example of the translator's difficulties over a single complex word and one which serves to illustrate the problem in general lies in the many usages of *art*.²⁰

Art comes from old French and the accusative form of the Latin *ars* (artem), derived from a verb meaning 'to fit' (Greek *artios* -fitting). The *OED* offers a crop of definitions, given in historical order: (1) *art* - skill, attained the result of knowledge or practice (1225). The King James (commonly known as the 'Authorised Version') of the Bible (1611) retained this denotation.

(2) *art* - human skill, workmanship as an agent. Chaucer and Shakespeare both used the word in this sense.

(3) *art* - learning of a mediaeval scholastic or skill in subjects of taste, such as painting, engraving, sculpture, architecture. This according to *OED*, is the most modern sense of the word but it did not appear in the dictionary until 1880.

(4) A second mediaeval meaning makes *art* - something wherein skill may be displayed. The Bachelor of Arts degree, for example, which attests to a practical attainment of a certain standard of scholarship, carries this implications; so do referents like 'art of conversation', 'black art', 'graphic art'.

(5) Shakespeare uses the derivative *artful* as early as 1600. It (and the related *artifice*) meant stratagem, wile, trick, cunning, device. *Artful*, *artifice*, *artificer*, *artisan*, and *artist* all suggest skill in adapting a means to an end. *Artful*, as in 'artful dodger' implies craft or deceit.

Artifice is a word of great complexity. It comes from Old French and Latin *artificium* - something made by 'art', that is by construction or workmanship. *Artifice* signifies ingenuity and its meaning eventually converged with one of the meanings of *art*; *artifice* often carries the implication of cunning or trickery as in (5). *Artificer* may be traced to Anglo — Norman or Middle English and means an inventor. The *OED* gives 'wily person'. *Artificial*, an antonym of *natural*, suggests a lack of spontaneity. It was used in this sense by Wyclif (1382) but its modern meaning of something 'made up', that is, feigned or affected, or even non-existent, as in 'artificial horizon' or 'artificial wealth', has superseded the older meaning.

Confronted with the word *art*, therefore, the translator has to 'feel for' its meaning in context. When Sir Thomas Browne wrote in *Religio Medici* that

Art is the Perfection of Nature — Nature hath
made One World and Art another

or Shakespeare in *Hamlet*,

More matter with less art

what is the translator to do? Has the language into which he is translating the range of English? What about the phrase 'the art of the possible' which is attributed to Bismarck? Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* (15th edn. 1980) lists 175 usages of the

word, classifiable under the *OED* headings but not always capable of being assigned to a context without inviting further dispute. As the Latin proverb put it, *ars est celare artem*, and the same caution applies to the translator, who must in Arnold's phrase 'know enough' before he addresses himself to his task.

We are now in the midst of a spate of translations from languages which have hitherto been barred to the Occidental; not since the early Renaissance has the flood been so great. —Then the sources were Greek, Latin, French and other European vernaculars and the versions varied in quality from useful and pedestrian to imaginative and recreative. Most fall into the former category and are poor in quality, uncertain and affected by the inexperienced translator's tendency to multiply synonyms in order to smother the precise meaning of the (usually Latin) origin. Now the originals are Oriental — the great *corpus* of classical and modern Japanese literature is now available in English and much the same applies to Arabic, from which English translations were first made in the 19th Century.²¹ Only Chinese still persistently escapes the attentions of the Western translator. To take a glaring example, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, agreed to be the finest novel in Chinese, has never been published in a full English version, though a shortened version of poor quality exists. Moreover, hardly a single important work of Chinese fiction exists in a sound English or French version. Renderings of Japanese into European Languages other than English have been but faint reflections, they are nearly all second-hand linguistically, being based on English versions and not the original Japanese.²²

Literary criticism has been 'Eurocentric', mainly because both judged and judges have been Europeans, proclaiming themselves with much historical qualification the axis of the earth and the cradle of civilization. Though there were many European languages, there is — or was until recently — only one principal religion and only one generally accepted aesthetic tradition, symbolised by the creations of architects, musicians and painters, which bear witness to a shared cultural history. In his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), discussing the effects of dead writing on the living, T.S. Eliot rejected the notion that dead writers were remote because of our superior knowledge — 'because we *know* so much more than they did'. He capped this statement with another — 'Precisely, and they are that which we know'.

He wants to 'know' them can learn their languages. One very important justification for learning a foreign language is that one may eventually be able to read its literature in the original without having recourse to translators' versions. But learning languages takes time, and time is, as we are told, of the essence. To increase one's understanding of human potentialities and artistic achievement through the reading of translations is therefore the only alternative available. Indeed, a school of thought exists which rejects the language-learning process as wasteful, since to acquire a sufficient competence to enable one to penetrate beyond the formidable bastions of grammar and literal comprehension would scarcely ever be possible.

Very few people ever become really bi-lingual and fewer bi-cultural, or wish to do so. Somerset Maugham held that the only language apart from English that was worth learning was French, because of the immense cultural influence of France on the world.²³ To acquire minor languages, like a squirrel picking up nuts, without at the same time deriving cultural advantage in the form of a great civilization, may give personal pleasure, but it has a dubious value otherwise.

Maugham's opinions may be thought philistine (and indeed they were, by his many decriers) but the flood of commercial translations of classical and modern, specialised and popular writings from scores of languages, European and other, has had its effects on language teaching-motivation has been changed from the cultural to the utilitarian, and the atmosphere of the study has been succeeded by that of the trade school. Even the one-eyed translator has come into his own kingdom at last, even if all he does is to provide the German market with versions of Edgar Wallace and the Russian television viewer with a dubbed account of the dialogue in *The Forsyte Saga*. Whatever he attempts, it should be accurate and faithful to its original along the lines described here, no matter what that original may be — Homer's Greek, Langland's Middle English or a fashionable romance by Françoise Sagan demand the same disciplined approach, which is always the result of training and preparation. Translation is no longer an amateur's pastime and though one may regret the passing of the leisured Victorian who occupied a score of years in producing a refined version of a poetical classic, just as one sadly looks back at Newman's chartered model of a university, the intrusive contemporary reality has to be accepted — the translator has been made over into a professional, procedure by a professional education, every bit as much as the creative engineer or more appropriately perhaps, the architect.²⁴

Notes

1. Douglas, Gavin, *Virgil's Aeneid*, ed. for the Scottish Text Society by David F.C. Coldwell (Blackwoods: Edinburgh and London 1954-63 4 vols.). A one-volume edition was edited by Emrys Jones for the Clarendon Medieval and Tudor series: Oxford 1964, Ezra Pound claimed that Douglas's version bettered the original.
2. Bickersteth, G.L. trans. *The Divine Comedy, by Dante Alighieri*, text with translation (Blackwell 1980).
3. Canto x, 34-6.

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4. Canto xxxii, 67-8.
5. *op. cit.*, Prologue, 115-8.
6. In *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, 1954).
7. An 'intuitive' statement on the author's part since his own knowledge of Scots was not 'native' and had its source in e.g. W.A. Craigie's *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST).
8. V, iii, 83-4.
9. IV, vii, 1-8.
10. *ibid* 536-41.
11. *Op. cit.* (London 1967) 14-5.
12. For instance, the fact that the lyric tradition was seminal in the development of Japanese prose literature and because of the interlarding of verse with other types of writing.
13. Nearly all of these are in English. See the select bibliography in Donald Keene, comp. and ed., *Modern Japanese Literature* (London 1953).
14. lit. 'proved a good risk'.
15. 'dronke is as a mous' (Chauce, *Knicht's Tale*, 1261): 'worthe bothe his eres' (Langland, *Piers Plowman*, Prologue).
16. Now superseded by the Athlone Press edition of G. Kane and G. Donaldson (London 1965) EETS eds. were published A-text 1867; B-text 1869; C-text 1873; *apparatus criticus* 1877; 1884 and a parallel ed. in 1886.
17. This argument was first put forward by E.J. Dobson in *English and Germanic Studies* (1947-8), I, 60-1.
18. Admitting that is is easy to find fault with Skeat. The fact that his edition has stood up for so long speaks for its quality.
19. All words having a wide variety of equivalentents (cf. Kurath, *Middle English Dictionary*).
20. Cf. Johnson, E.A.J., *The Predecessors of Adam Smith* (New York 1937) ch. xiii.
21. cf. n. 12 *supra*.
22. e.g. Charles Haguenaer's version of a chapter from Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji* and Andre Beaujard's *Les Notes de Chevet de Soi Shonagon*.
23. In the *Summing-Up* (1938) though he was not consistent in holding this opinion.
24. For some general ideas on the subject see Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden 1964), ch. 7 'The Role of the Translator'.

A useful introduction to some of the problems involved in the process of translating literary texts may be found in Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (London and New York 1980, reprinted 1983), which also contains a select bibliography.