

Towards a Post-Colonial Alliance? Some Perspectives on Franco- Scots Poetry Translation

By Paul Magrati

I would like to thank The Bottle Imp for inviting me to reflect on my work as a translator of both French and Scots. In this article — the first I have written on this topic — I outline a few ideas regarding the normative tendency of Franco-Scots interactions and the way to escape it. This involves a critique of condescending and self-deprecating attitudes underlying many Franco-Scots adaptations (including some of my earlier work). Whilst I am aware that my argument could be applied to other translation pairs including both an established and a minority language, I have limited myself to the one duo I know and love best.

French and Scots seem an odd linguistic pair. On the one hand, French literature has been — and remains — infatuated with its own prestige as a pristine world language, a classical lingua franca, and a proudly imperial standard. Yet on the other, Modern Scots writing has long been defined by its indigenous anxiety and minority statelessness. Certainly, Scotland possesses no ancient *Scots Académie*, no governmental *Institut Ecossais*, no post-colonial *Organisation Internationale de la Scottophonie* — none of the institutions which have established the international clout of French for centuries past. By contrast, Scots can merely rely on its one-and-a-half million speakers, its handful of activists, and its coterie of poets — many of whom tend to disagree about the definition, standard, and vocation of their ‘mother tongue’.

Such a contrast becomes stronger still when dealing with Franco-Scots poetry translation. In proper Auld-Alliance fashion, this discrepancy between the heights of French officialdom and the howes of Scottish vernacular cringe has led many Scots poets to translate French verse (amongst other continental writings) in an effort to bolster the respectability of their own language. According to John Corbett’s history of Scots literary translation, this trend even shaped the origins

of Scots: 'Scottish literature was founded on translation', argues Corbett, before adding that 'translation from a wide range of prestigious literatures' has been crucial, throughout the history of Scots, in 'raising its status and establishing its validity as a literary medium'.¹ Indeed, Corbett explains how adaptation of Middle French romances into early Scots provided a template which inspired the first masterpiece of Scots literature, John Barbour's *The Brus* (c.1375).² This French connection, Corbett insists, has accompanied Scots literature until the present day. From Alexander Montgomerie's 1540s adaption of Pierre de Ronsard's poetry to Allan Ramsay's 1720s imitation of La Fontaine's *Fables* and from Sydney Goodsir Smith's 1945 translations of Tristan Corbières to Liz Lochhead's *Tartuffe* (1986) and Edwin Morgan's *Cyrano* (1992), French appears the unmistakable ally of Scots poets trying to gain national credibility.

As is often the case with Franco-Scottish relations, however, French poets failed to match the efforts of their Scots partners. Whilst French adaptations of Scottish historical novels, Scottish crime fictions, Scottish urban prose, and Scottish Anglophone poetry have produced many Parisian best-sellers, Scots poetry, on the other hand, remains largely unexplored in France.³ Strikingly, Robert Burns was the only Scots poet available to French readers before the late twentieth century. Yet even then, the quality of Burns's French renditions (respectively published in 1843, 1893, and 1994) was rather poor. Those were left unrhymed and unmetred — a situation which prevented Burns's songs from ever reaching the same level of popularity in France as they did, for instance, in Germany and Russia.⁴

Apart from Burns, French readers had to wait until the late 1990s to access further Scots verse. Following the international success of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), translations of contemporary Scots poets, including Robert Crawford, W. N. Herbert, Liz Lochhead, Stuart Paterson, and Sheena Blackhall found their way into French poetry reviews.⁵ This new French interest in Scots poetry was reinforced, the following decade, by Jean-Jacques Blanchot's 2004 translation of the work of Scottish medieval 'makar' William Dunbar (his first French adaption in five hundred years).⁶ Moreover, in 2016, Breton poet Paol Keineg published the first French anthology of (short) poems by Hugh MacDiarmid.⁷

Whilst these are promising beginnings, much more must still be achieved to introduce the rich, diverse, and venerable tradition of Scots poetry to a French audience. Robert Henryson, Alexander Montgomerie, Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson, Robert Tannahill, Violet Jacob, Hugh MacDiarmid's long poems, William Soutar, Sidney Goodsir Smith, Robert Garioch, Hamish Henderson as well as Scots poems by Kathleen Jamie, Liz Lochhead, and Jackie Kay are yet to cross the Channel Sea.

It is in this uneven context that I first became interested in producing Franco-Scots poetry translations. In the early stages, following in the footsteps of earlier translators, my preoccupation was chiefly with the international credibility of Scots. Indeed, I aimed to prove (with a hint of unconscious condescension) that Scots, just like French, could be a powerful lyrical medium. This meant, in other words, that whether it be the source or the target language, Scots remained the real object of my translation — the only language which needed validation. French language, on the other hand, did not seem to need such care. After all, it was an established, authoritative, and full-bodied language, with nothing to demonstrate but its solidarity and curiosity about the minority verse of a marginal nation. This trend of thought, moreover, seemed true to the general history of Franco-Scots translation (and relations). Whilst mighty French had the power to rescue and legitimise its small Scots ally, it was inconceivable that Scots could ever return the favour.

My first translation attempts included a Scots adaptation of 'The Marseillaise' (first verse and chorus) and a French rendition of Robert Burns's 'Scots wha hae':

'The Scots Marseillaise'
after Rouget de Lisle (1792)

*Raise up bairns o the mitherlaund,
There daws the morn o glory,
Tyrannous faes are at oor haund
An their wav'rin flag is gory!
Can ye hearken on yonder lea,
The gowel o rammish sodgers?
They are creepin ahint o ye,
Yer louns an luvie fir tae murder!*

*Tae airms, tae airms, ma freens,
Haud forrit volunteers!
Mairch on, mairch on!
The people's bluid
Will drook yon braes o'er!*

« La Marseillaise »
par Rouget de Lisle (1792)

*Allons enfants de la Patrie,
Le jour de gloire est arrivé,
Contre nous de la tyrannie
L'étendard sanglant est levé!
Entendez-vous dans les campagnes,
Mugir ces féroces soldats
Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras,
Egorger vos fils, vos compagnes!*

*Aux armes citoyens!
Formez vos bataillons!
Marchons, marchons,
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons.*

« Robert Bruce s'Adresse à ses Troupes lors de la Bataille de Bannockburn »
d'après Robert Burns (1793)

*Écossais, héros de Wallace,
Féaux de Bruce, de l'audace!
Pour vous le lit de la disgrâce,
A défaut de victoire!*

*Voici le jour et voici l'heure;
Voyez les lueurs du champ d'honneur
Voyez Édouard l'air supérieur—
Les fers du désespoir!*

Qui donc a l'âme du félon?

*Qui donc pour la fosse aux fripons?
Qui donc les serviles poltrons?
Qu'ils décampent et s'enfuient!*

*Par les malheurs de l'oppression!
Par vos enfants en sujétion!
Nos tendres veines couleront
Pour les faire affranchir!*

*A bas l'usurpateur honni!
La curée pour la tyrannie!
Que chaque souffle ensemble crie:
Vivre libre ou mourir!*

**'Robert Bruce's Address to His Troops at Bannockburn'
by Robert Burns (1793)**

*Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to Victorie!*

*Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front o' battle lour;
See approach proud Edward's power—
Chains and Slaverie!*

*Wha will be a traitor knave?
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a Slave?
Let him turn and flee!*

*By Oppression's woes and pains!
By your Sons in servile chains!
We will drain our dearest veins,
But they shall be free!*

*Lay the proud Usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!*

Liberty's in every blow!—

Let us Do or Die!

These pieces, rendering Burns into Standard French and adapting 'The Marseillaise' into Synthetic Scots (or 'Lallans'), fit into the mainstream of Franco-Scots poetry translation. Following Léon de Wailly, Jean-Jacques Blanchot, and Paul Keineg on the French side, as well as twentieth-century Scots translators including Sydney Goodsir Smith, Douglas Young, Liz Lochhead, and Edwin Morgan, I tried to present Scots, through the synthesis of its many dialects, as a credible national language, capable to render lofty French rhetoric whilst being translatable into the pristine meter and rhyming scheme of poetic French.

This first experience of Franco-Scots translation proved exhilarating. In the months that followed I adapted many more poems, exploring different styles and eras — from Scots translations of Paul Verlaine and Isidore Ducasse to French versions of Hamish Henderson's 'Farewell to Sicily' and Robert Burns's 'A Red, Red Rose'.

Yet the more I translated, the more I began to query my own practice. Whilst pretending to assert the credibility of Scots poetry, my translation activity (like that of my distinguished predecessors) ran the risk of enshrining the inferiority of Scots. Since Scots was the only language whose validity was at stake in the translation process and since proving the worth of Scots was the *raison d'être* of my activity, I found myself having to assume both the lowliness of Scots and the prominence of French in order to justify my work. In other words, the unequal structure of Franco-Scots translation, between the ever-insecure presentation of Scots and the ever-prestigious depiction of French, seemed unable to achieve its declared goal — that of establishing Scots as a robust international language. Not only was this issue damaging for Scots, apparently condemned to remain a junior partner in the translation duo, but this also betrayed a profoundly naïve understanding of French.

Although French might appear, from afar, a prominent world language, it is by no means monochromatic. Colonial oppression disseminated French over four continents, leading native populations to often appropriate and blend the language of the settlers with their own tongue. These various forms of creole and extra-metropolitan French constitute the major part of Francophone speech,

involving 235 million people around the world outside mainland France.⁸ This reality means that French is a much more colourful, motley, and unstable construct than is often portrayed in the rest of the western world. Despite the conservative management of Académie Française — eager to display French as an immutable norm — irrepressible changes are under way and are already visible in mainland France, from immigrant communities to French urban demotic.⁹

Similarly to French, Scots is also marked by its imperialist history. Although this complicated past is often obscured by the current situation of Modern Scots as a minority, subaltern, ('colonised') language, Scotland's role in Britain's colonial adventure had significant consequences on the development and exportation of Scottish vernacular. This is perfectly illustrated by Sean Murphy's recent thesis on 'Scots Language and British Imperialism', which testifies to a chest-beating kind of 'verbal tartanry' amongst nineteenth-century Scottish settlers, from Indian Burns suppers to West-Indian broadsheets.¹⁰ Beyond hackneyed dirges of ever-repressed, twee, and 'wee' indigeneity, the history of Scots now clearly appears an unusual mixture of colonised trauma and imperial vainglory.

Certainly, French and Scots literatures have long turned a blind eye to their colonial past. My present conviction, however, is that by highlighting this blind spot, Scots and French can be brought together on a more equal footing and escape the impasse of Franco-Scots translation.

More precisely, post-colonial (or decolonial) thought could change the current mindset of Franco-Scots translation, from one which gauges the credibility of Scots on a normative, Eurocentric scale to one which would deconstruct such a scale and level the field of linguistic respectability. Crucially, this new standpoint should enable Scots to become the equal partner of French within the translation process.

The main reason for this is that the contemporary scene of Scots poetry, during the last few decades, has initiated a much deeper decolonising process than has its French (especially mainland French) counterpart. To put it more provocatively — Scots poets might have a few lessons to teach the French. Certainly, this broadly sweeping statement would require extensive justification of a kind which lies beyond the scope of this article.¹¹ Nonetheless, a few points might be raised to account for the rapid decolonisation of Scots verse.

Firstly, Scots is inherently a Scottophonie. Whereas French literature is still split between its metropolitan centre and its extra-metropolitan, Francophone periphery, Scots knows no such division. Certainly, the influence of Central Belt Scots (and particularly of Glaswegian Scots) has been growing for the last half century. Yet speakers of Border Scots, Dundonian, Doric, Orcadian, Shetlandic, and Ulster Scots have long asserted the multipolar identity of their language. Indeed, most writers tend to enter the Scots scene through their particular dialects. Likewise, even advocates of Synthetic Scots (or 'Lallans') need the wealth of dialect words to preserve a rich, credible writing style. In other words, the strength of Scots has long lay in its scattering. For centuries the language has survived as a plural whole, without resorting to an overarching norm.

This situation, imposed by the anglicisation of Scottish institutions, has paradoxically made it easier to address the contradiction between vernacular resistance, at home, and Scottish colonialism, abroad. This is especially true for Scots poets of the second half of the twentieth century. Tom Leonard's 'Six Glasgow Poems' (1967) remains exemplary, amongst those, in their attempt at debunking the imperial tendencies of both English and Lallans, whilst recovering the raw, proletarian, and indigenous voice of Glaswegian Scots. Admittedly, the colonised-colonising history of Scots could also boost the more unapologetic, neo-imperial wing of Scottish nationalism. Yet Leonard and his followers have proved that Scottophonie had the maturity to engage its own decolonising process. Their concrete experience of classism and linguistic discrimination, in Scotland, contrasted with the situation of many established metropolitan French writers, whose abstract universalism still serves to disguise neo-colonial attitudes towards the rest of the Francophone world.

Certainly, creole, indigenous, dialectal, and decolonial approaches have also led to significant developments in contemporary Francophone poetry. It would be ridiculous, for instance, to deny the influence of Francophone poets such as the Martinican Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001), Haitian Félix Morisseau Leroy (1912-1998), Algerian Youcef Sebti (1943-1993), and Congolese Alain Mabanckou (1966-) as well as countless Francophone rappers and slammers. These notwithstanding, however, and despite the emergence of new Francophone literary prizes and publishing houses, the unequal power structure of the French literary scene remains largely in favour of the mainland French establishment.

Decolonial Scots poetry, on the other hand, has grown under better auspices. The smallness of the Scots poetry scene, combined with its culture of internationalism and resistance against anglicisation, has proved open to post-colonial, Leonardite themes. Leading Scots poets of the past three decades, including Edwin Morgan, Liz Lochhead, W.N. Herbert, Robert Crawford, Kathleen Jamie, Jackie Kay, and more recently Roseanne Watt and Harry Josephine Giles, are all interested in decolonial verse of a kind which defies linguistic standards, challenges normative mindsets, and juggles with spelling. Likewise, most institutions involved in publishing and representing Scots poetry, including publishers (Tapsalteerie, Luath), poetry reviews (Gutter, Lallans, The Poet's Republic), the Scottish Poetry Library, the Scots Language Centre, and Scots Makar, Jackie Kay, are all sympathetic (if not openly committed) to post-colonial writing.

Considered through this new, post-colonial lens, Franco-Scots poetry translation can turn into a more reciprocal exchange. As the French poetic aura can serve the cause of Scots by testing its credibility as a translating partner, so can post-colonial Scots poetry expand Francophone virtuosity. Indeed, it seems unimaginable to translate such poets as Tom Leonard, W.N. Herbert, and Harry Josephine Giles into French without a complete deconstruction of Standard French and a radical decolonisation of its implied hierarchies. To do so, French translators must reinvent their own language, promote new codes, new values, and above all transform their activity into a full-blown experimental project.

I recently made a first attempt in this direction with an urban French translation of 'Good Style', the last of Tom Leonard's 'Glasgow Poems'.¹² This adaptation, unlike anything I have ever written, forced me to recall my young teenage voice, with its mixture of Standard French, old Parisian dialect, Arabic-derived words, and 'verlan' (literally 'verse-re' — reverse, backward speech). Reaching back to my raw, teen, suburban 'patter', upgraded with experimental spelling and grammar, seemed the only way to render Leonard's highly deconstructed verse:

« Beau style »

D'après Tom Leonard (1967)

relou de ouf à tilter hein

tsais

stu piges app tu peux gageder

vazy

casstoi dmon minche

chuisaussi stylé quvouzaut' là

chais çque jfais

jtedis

wesh mêmpa tu mparles commass

colltoi ton style

où quej pense

'Good Style'

Tom Leonard (1967)

helluva hard tay read theez init

stull

if yi canny unnirston thim jiss clear aff then

gawn

get tay fuck ootma road

ahmaz goodiz thi lota yiz so ah um

ah no whit ahm dayn

tellnyi

jiss try enny a yir fly patir wi me

stick thi bootnyi good style

so ah wull

This is merely a first experiment and further efforts will be required — including those of other translators — before the benefits of post-colonial, Franco-Scots translation can be truly demonstrated. Being now convinced that Scots and French form not an odd, but a complementary poetic pair, I hope to continue in that same direction. Scots can indeed teach French a few lessons — including that there should be no master in the process of translation.

However, this does not imply that adaptations in either Standard French or Synthetic Scots should be jettisoned as belonging to the colonial past. Although my Lallans translation of 'The Marseillaise' and my urban French rendition of 'Good Style' might seem antithetical, I would argue that these are instead compatible.

Decolonisation implies the deconstruction of imperial norms whereby colonising standards are overthrown. But deconstruction does not equate annihilation, and old colonial standards, once debunked, may still serve to build a post-colonial future. In other words, as long as the colonial, normative value system is eradicated, I see no contradiction between the preservation of a poetic standard (be it Standard French alexandrines or Synthetic Scots Standard Habbie) and the unravelling of it. The deconstruction of a code is only understandable — and enjoyable — for readers who know this code in the first place. Likewise, the partnership of Standard French and Synthetic Scots (expurgated from Scottish self-pity and French self-aggrandisement) can be compatible with post-colonial solidarity between decolonial Scots and Francophone verse. Linguistic standards unite readers, who in turn broaden the reception of poetic deconstruction.

When it finally sees the light, the first Franco-Scots anthology of poetry translation shall bring together tightly standard and wildly disentangled forms. This is the only way through which a new, post-colonial partnership might be worth contracting — the only way towards a new poetic alliance. From ‘patter’ to creole and ‘Lallans’ to lingua franca, French and Scots may yet share the wealth of nations.

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