

4. Reciprocities and Circularities - Notes on BOSLIT's Literary Exchanges

By Tom Hubbard

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So much for a summary of research methodologies, and a fuller account of my BOSLIT travels can be found at The BOSLIT 'Grand Tour' (of Sorts). In the related contexts of my work as Librarian of the Scottish Poetry Library from 1984 to 1992, and of my personal research pursuits as a literary historian, I was more generally concerned with issues of translation and reciprocal reception of diverse literary cultures across borders. I can never regard these as self-contained

disciplines, as they naturally imply wider philosophical matters. In other words, we need to interpret whatever may lie behind the bare bibliographical data. This, if you like, is the task for post-BOSLIT scholars. What are the stories behind the project's findings? BOSLIT itself is analogous to musical notation: necessary, but we need to hear the actual music.

I'll offer some examples, and they're not all harmonious. Translation isn't always some cosy means of mutual understanding even as, say, poets gather together at international festivals with their promise of good cheer, conversation, food, booze, and other intra-mural delights. Seamus Heaney's poem 'Known World' (in his collection *Electric Light*, 2001) serves as a tart reminder of this. When I was at the Scottish Poetry Library, a report came to us of the kind of phenomenon which is embarrassing to those close to it, but amusing to everyone else. A Scottish poet attending a festival in the then-Yugoslavia had offered his poem 'Private Ward' to the resident translators. It concerned, well, a private ward in a hospital. When the translation was performed, it was accompanied by theatrical business involving a uniformed player marching up and down the hall, in the lowly persona of an army Private with the name of Ward.

It's not just a case of linguistic misunderstandings: cultural differences can be missed even if a translation conscientiously follows a linguistically literal path. If the translator is working at one more removes from the language of the original, the hazard is increased. Early Russian translations of Walter Scott would appear via the intermediary French versions of Auguste-Jean-Baptiste Defauconpret: there's an instance of Scott's Scottish peasants, with their traditions of literacy and autodidacticism (think James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd), becoming degraded Russian muzhiks, all mud and vodka.

I'll return to the challenges of cultural difference later in this article, but for present purposes I'll take Robert Louis Stevenson as another test case, and will start with an admittedly hypothetical scenario. Let's imagine an attempt to provide a translation, into Scots, of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and that the moment when Emma realises there's been a turning point in her life - 'J'ai un amant!' - requires its response from our putative translator. He or she might recall a comparable moment in Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston*, when the younger Kirstie exclaims 'Will I hae gotten my jo?', and go on to choose a grammatically equivalent variant of that expression for her French counterpart. Without claiming much for the questionable notions of French sexiness as opposed to

Scottish prudishness, and while noting that both Emma Bovary and Kirstie Elliott are unsophisticated provincials, it can't be advanced that 'Will I hae gotten my jo?' has quite the same suggestiveness as 'J'ai un amant!' Quite apart from the issue that one's a statement and one's a self-questioning, the difference here is more cultural than erotic. As travellers at Heathrow are warned when they board the London Underground: Mind the Gap.

Jenni Calder has remarked that Stevenson 'reveals a teasing mixture of the Tory and the radical' (Calder 5). The young habitué of the dens of Leith Walk, whatever he got up to, would eventually return, tail between his legs, to his loving but flinty-faced father. To recall a tag long attached to RLS, he was a 'pirate' who was after all a 'Presbyterian pirate', and from a strictly conformist Victorian Edinbourgeois background. The protagonist of many of the stories in the early *New Arabian Nights* (1882) is Prince Florizel, who leads a double life as quasi-bohemian and as potentate of the country once called Bohemia. In these personae he can be both louche daredevil and stuffy authoritarian, a species of churchy camp.

It is ironic that in many ways Florizel (florid-zeal?) anticipates the decadents of the following decade, for Stevenson was less than enthusiastic about the French figures of the Symbolist and decadent tendencies. ('Symbolism' and 'decadence' are not quite the same thing, as has long been emphasised, but they are certainly related and it's not always easy to distinguish the one from the other. [Milner 8-9])

Stevenson's interests in French literature were old-fashioned, and he revelled in the mediievally Gothic ambience of Villon, Hugo and Dumas *père* rather than in the likes of Mallarmé and Verlaine, and he never missed a chance to take a swipe at Zola. Yet in 1896 Mallarmé was an enthusiastic supporter of French moves to honour publicly the lately dead Scot. During Stevenson's lifetime, his work attracted the attention of a minor Symbolist, Marcel Schwob, who translated 'Will o' the Mill' into French and wrote enthusiastic essays on his works. The enthusiasm was not reciprocated. In 1894 Stevenson wrote to Schwob with his customary courtesy and grace, while delicately praising with faint damnation his young fan's new book, *Mimes*:

You have yet to give us - and I am expecting it with impatience - something of a larger gait; something daylight, not twilight; something with the colours of life, not

the flat tints of a temple illumination; something that shall be said with all the clearnesses and the trivialities of speech, not sung like a semi-articulate lullaby. (Stevenson 1995, 316-17)

Stevenson's compatriot R. B. Cunninghame Graham was prepared to look more sympathetically at their literary contemporaries in France; he championed Maupassant against Anglo-Saxon sentimentality and preachiness, asserting that 'he wrote as an artist, and let his readers draw their own conclusions'. (Graham 1898)

Stevenson was not totally indifferent to the French avant-garde: he admired and even defended the controversial sculptor Rodin, whose art nouveau curves are executed with the masculine vigour that the sickly Scotsman may well have envied. However, we should not take too seriously Stevenson's claim to have played 'the sedulous ape' (Stevenson 1924, 29) to Baudelaire. True, he admits the immaturity of this species of influence. Essentially, it had been a pose. This is more revealing: in 1875, the old-head-on-young-shoulders side of RLS expresses itself priggishly and pompously on Baudelaire's translation of a story ('Hop-Frog') by Edgar Allan Poe:

[I]f it is pity that we feel towards Poe, it is certainly not pity that inspires us as we think of Baudelaire, who could sit down in cold blood, and dress out in suitable French this pointless farrago of horrors. (Stevenson 1923; see also Hubbard 2007)

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I've taken Stevenson as an example of *reciprocal cultural exchange*. BOSLIT charts the territory of a foreign culture's reception of Scottish literary texts. The converse of BOSLIT is also implicit in what I've been saying about Stevenson, as regards the responses of Scottish writers and translators to the works of non-Scottish authors. Landmarks of Scottish reception of German literature would include Carlyle on Schiller, and the pioneering translations of Kafka by the husband-and-wife team of Edwin and Willa Muir. There is evidence that Muriel Spark was strongly influenced by Proust (Spark 1953).

We may also consider what I'd call *circular cultural exchange*. Let me offer a

quirky example of this. Pushkin made a Russian version of 'The Twa Corbies'. Edwin Morgan took Pushkin's piece and turned it into his own Scots version, of which this is the first stanza:

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(Morgan 1996, 333-34)

So we've got a circle there - Scots into Russian, then back into Scots.

For possible future scholars to follow up, I'll suggest a few hypothetical examples of what I'm getting at. The prolific Scottish writer Margaret Oliphant's novel *A Beleaguered City* (1880) has as its setting the French city of Semur. Let us suppose that it was reviewed in a French periodical (it might well have been ...). Maybe there are other reviews. How might a French reviewer respond to a Scottish novel with French content? It would clearly be another form of the circularity.

Other examples could include a French response to Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*; moreover, Oliphant's and Stevenson's contemporary Andrew Lang produced two books centred on Joan of Arc. It would be interesting to know how a hypothetical French reviewer reacted to a Scot who had the temerity to write about such a national icon.

Every translator of a literary text - especially of a poem - is obliged to consider a triangle whose points are linguistic, aesthetic and - yes - cultural, and to find the best place for his or her version within the space of that triangle. As regards the linguistic, there is the demand for the translator to reflect as accurately as possible the sense of the original; the pull of the aesthetic, however, is to create a rendering that can be artistically pleasing in its own right, thus avoiding the clunky literalness of an overly faithful version. One sees the need for a compromise somewhere within the triangle.

There remains the third angle, the cultural, often the most challenging to be taken into account (and here I echo warnings such as I made earlier). This would

include geographically and historically specific allusions that can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to convey in the target language, be that English, Scots or Gaelic. The geographical allusions are more tractable than those which are historical: one solution here is to replace the place-names cited in an original poem with more or less comparable Scottish place-names. In his Scots versions of German, Dutch and Danish ballads and poems, Alexander Gray (1882-1968) deployed place names from Scottish regions which he knew well, such as Angus and the North-East. Conversely, the Swiss poet and translator August Corrodi (1826-1885), who turned Robert Burns into Swiss German, changed the Ayrshire rivers to the Rhine and the Reuss.

The historical references are trickier to get across - and that's an understatement. Each culture's historical memory is of course unique. A Hungarian poem will allude to an event in Hungarian history, and a Hungarian reader will pick up the echo. If one puts that straight into, say, a Scots version, it's not going to have the same resonance. A poet-translator would be well advised not to attempt to make use of whatever he or she might think is an equivalent in Scottish history: it won't exist. It's better to steer clear, then, of far-fetched and fatuous analogies.

The translators themselves: their work is so often taken for granted. It might or might not be signed with their name, or it might be indicated by initials, or presented anonymously. True, any of these alternatives might be their own preference, but that can't be assumed. How many of these behind-the-scenes workers have been exploited by editors and publishers? There's potential for research there.

One final point of research methodology. When I was working on BOSLIT, and intent on tracing translations published in Polish periodicals, it was necessary for me to travel to Warsaw and to undertake research on the spot in the Polish National Library. I located a version of Stevenson's 'The Bottle Imp' in a provincial newspaper, the *Gazeta torúnska*, nos. 147-157 (1895); at the time I made a photocopy of a sample page from the microfilm held in the library. That was back in 2002. Since then, digitisation of newspapers has made great strides and it's now possible to retrieve the complete text from your laptop at home. You no longer need to visit Warsaw, which is a pity - or rather more than a pity, for when I was there I had a meeting with Scottish literature specialists at the city's university, and we were able to initiate what proved to be productive cultural

diplomacy. Since then, Professor Aniela Korzeniowska and her colleagues have organised the 'Scotland in Europe' conferences at the Warsaw campus. There's no substitute, ultimately, for the human contact.

I've made much of the pitfalls inevitable in literary exchange. These can often have hilarious outcomes. That shouldn't put us off the overwhelmingly rewarding nature of that activity which we call translation which, to echo Emerson on beauty, 'is its own excuse for being'.

References & Further Information

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