Taming the Elephant

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The State of Scots

M. CARMELLI, 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 begins. 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 impressive – the Scottish National Dictionary, produced between 1931 and 1976 under the editorship of firstly William Grant and latterly David Morrison, 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 William Donaldson’s research illuminated an overlooked area, the widespread use of Scots in the press in an era which previously had been regarded as something of a low point.

Scots in the 21st century began with Matthew Finn’s first novel, a groundbreaking futurist dystopia, and Fin’s subsequent work in tandem with James Robertson in the Icy Coo! project is providing books for children that have proved – surprisingly, to many douthers – genuinely popular. 2003 saw the publication of The Edinburgh Companion to Scots, an important benchmark marking academic work which further underlined this new-found status, and in 2004 a team at Dundee University digitised the full text of all ten volumes of the SND and made them available free via the Dictionary of the Scots Language site.

The pluralistic approach employed in these key works, recording historical and geographical variants, shows Scots to be a very broad kirk, reaching from Shetland to Ulter, encompassing urban and rural – a ‘pluricentric diasystem’. The question of a fixed or standard orthography, for so long a sore issue, now appears less pressing in the postmodern era. Variations co-exist – indeed, it is a happy thing that they should.

Despite the obvious parallel experience of marginalisation, the relationship between Scots and “the Elephant” is markedly different from that of Gaelic. Many English people understand Scots – north eastern English dialects particularly have much in common with the southern forms of Scots, reminding us that the old kingdom of 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 ‘haar’. 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 the Vic’ – which I recognised immediately as ‘Kum de we’ (‘come this way’) from the tongue of Shetland. The contents too seemed very familiar.

But 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 the many Gaelic loan words and phrasings, 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 ‘negative transfusion’ 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 voice inhabiting their predominantly English language work, rather in the manner that the voice of Orkney inhabits the work of George Mackay Brown – the occasional word amongst an otherwise English text, perhaps the odd idiom translated to give the feel of Scots. As a result, the need to translate into English is less pressing – in many cases a small glossary is quite sufficient.

But in my own case, or that of my native tongue, the picture is different. I come from the most northern part of the Scots world, and grew up speaking a very distinctive form with considerable North German (Scandinavian) elements, even 500 hundred years after the transfer of political power from Copenhagen to Edinburgh. Shetland’s long history of North Sea trade with speakers of Dutch, Frisian, and Low Saxon is also a factor. Distinctiveness for the Shetlander is not an issue. The problem is more what to do with those parts of the local tongue that do not fit neatly into the English or the Scots alphabet, particularly the ‘Scandinavian vowels’ as they were once termed by the education authorities - but these issues I have written about elsewhere, and lie beyond the remit of this essay. I should mention, however, the vital work of the late John J. Graham in the 20th century, the key figure in giving the Shetland tongue the same authoritative credibility described earlier in relation to Scots as a whole.

Translation: visibility and enrichment

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 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 Faroe 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 bedfellow. But here I must add that this Elephant has been, to me, a marvellous crutch, 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 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 litere he provided into the target language – English – for Edinburgh Review. One thing he explained to me was the iconic place of the letter ‘š’ 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 ‘æ’ centuries ago – a short ‘a’ – Scots did not; so that MacDiarmid’s famous line, for instance, might be represented as: “‘I’ll he rae haufwae hoose.”

Following this work with Volodymyr Dibrova, I was approached to work with Nadia Kjurk on a Ukrainian feature for English as a second language focusing on Yevgen Pashkovski. I later worked on a similar basis with Liv Schiev, 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, began to make bilingual text. I realise 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, not lies passively abed awaiting the crush. The difficulty is intrinsic to the process of translation, is untranslatable; an idea sometimes attributed to Cöleridge and the elevated Romantic notion of the poetic art his work helped to engender. But it is an ancient thought, and in more recent times we find Roman Jakobsen taking it up: “Poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape to another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, eg. from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting.”

This distinction between translation and transposition is hierarchical – the presence of the word ‘only’ suggests the latter is inferior. In ‘transposing’ a poem interlingually, the person responsible is at best a ‘transposer’ – which has an amusing if accidental negative connotation, in its association with the French loan ‘poser’. 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, especially in the case of poetry, is something other, something allusive and elusive, even in the original - a complex of sound, image and idea, within an architecture, if we follow Pound’s following of Artaud.18 As different languages encode different world views, different ways of thinking about experience, so replication is impossible. “A word is a microcosm of human consciousness,” as Lev Semenovich Vygotsky19 wrote. Poetry, which makes such use of the muf-

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of researched essays and reviews of books or events which merit specialised attention.

Notes
1. www.dsl.ac.uk
4. The Language of the People William Donaldson, 1989
5. But n Ben A-Go-Go, 2000
6. www.itchy-coo.com
7. The Edinburgh Companion to Scots, eds. John Corbett; Derrick McClure; Jane Stuart-Smith
8. A Dictionary of North East Dialect, 2002
12. in A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, 1926
13. Index on Censorship, 3/1993
15. A book of translations from the LAF workshop held in Shetland in 2005 was published by the award-winning Canmore Press in conjunction with the Scottish Poetry Library (ed. Robyn Marsack, 2006)
16. for information on and examples of translation into Scots, see European Poetry in Scotland: An Anthology of Translations, ed. Peter France and Duncan Glen, 1989
17. www.robertalanjamieson.info/translations.html
19. discussion of logopoeia, phonopoeia, and melopoeia in How to Read, 1931

Times of Northwords are numbered.

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