

TRANSLATORS' FORUM

Against Self-Translation

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Self-translation as I understand it means that the author of a literary text completed in one language subsequently reproduces it in a second language. The second text resembles the first one sufficiently to be presented as its translation, though obviously to define it that way begs a number of important questions. Although my primary interest in this connection is poetry, prose writers translate themselves too. I could name a Catalan novelist who invented a fictitious personage to mask his own part in the Spanish-language edition of one of his books. Indeed, self-translation is a much more widespread phenomenon than one might think. The most eminent, and some would say the most notorious recent example is the Nobel Prize-winning poet Joseph Brodsky, who, after intervening massively in the translations of his Russian originals by other hands, began to do his own, even, where he saw fit, adding further stanzas to a poem in its new English format. In Paris in 1929, Marina Tsvetaeva, whom Brodsky has described as the greatest phenomenon in Russian verse since Pushkin, attempted first a French translation, then a French reworking of her epic poem *The Swain*, unpublished to this day. In 1933 she also offered to a series of French journals a prose piece entitled *Les nuits florentines*, based on her letters to Abram Vishniak, who had run a small publishing house in Berlin when she lived there.¹

Moving to the Hispanic world, the Catalan poet Josep Carner, who found himself outside Spain as a member of the diplomatic service when the Civil War broke out, and spent the remainder of his long life in voluntary exile, published what is considered to be his major achievement, the long poem *Nabí*, in a Castilian version in Mexico City in 1939, a year before the Catalan original came out in Buenos Aires.² The play

¹ See Simon Karlinsky, *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, her World, her Poetry* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 207.

² See Jordi Cornudella, *'Nabí' de Josep Carner* (Barcelona, 1986), p. 8.

he wrote in Spanish as a tribute to the generosity he experienced during his years in Mexico, *El Misterio de Quanaxhuata* (1943), was subsequently reworked in Catalan as *El ben cofat i l'altre*, and published in Perpignan in 1951.³ Spain since the death of Franco is perhaps richer than other European nations in instances of self-translation, although, in an anthology of Galician poetry published by the Malaga-based magazine *Litoral* which reproduced the original texts in reduced format next to the Spanish versions, only three out of sixteen poets included actually chose to translate their own work.⁴

Brodsky's practice as a self-translator would require an entire conference to do it justice. But, if I were to set the Russian and English texts of one of his poems side by side, how many of his English-speaking readers would manage to follow? So there is a difficulty of method, too. That it should more or less be taken for granted, in Scotland, that to place one of Sorley MacLean's Gaelic originals next to his own English translation would be equally exclusive, is part of what I want to complain about in this paper. But the main problem is that I am drawn to discuss self-translation because of personal experience, and to set my own practice alongside Brodsky's would be an act of unspeakable arrogance. The most modest, and the most useful thing to do, would be to describe my own trajectory as a translator, and how this has led me to perceive the practice of self-translation, which in my case was not a voluntary choice but an imposition.

I would like first of all to make a distinction between people who translate poetry, and poets who translate because the act of translation has its meaning within a wider context of non-translated creative work. This becomes something between appropriation and apprenticeship: the possibility of a dialogue with the pre-existing text, or of an imagined dialogue with the person who wrote it, is infinitely more important than any desire to make that person's work available to a wider public. For a poet, translating another poet is never a pragmatic (in the social sense) or an altruistic act. And if you are uncertain which category to assign a translator to, I would suggest that you simply calculate the proportion between original poetry and translation in their published work. That is a fair and honest test, although it may seem brutal. Several years ago, when a postgraduate student in the department where I teach requested a private interview, and asked how I managed to carry out creative work in an academic environment, I told her, first, that being

³ See Jaume Subirana, *Josep Carner: l'Exili del Mite (1945-1970)* (Barcelona, 2000), pp. 152ff.

⁴ *Litoral: Revista de la Poesia, el Arte y el Pensamiento*, nos 209-10 (*Poesia Gallega Contemporanea*), 1996.

gay helped, because it put a kind of *cordon sanitaire* around you, and second, that it was possible to request the assistance of other poets, preferably dead ones. These answers were spontaneous and sincere. It occurred to me some time afterwards that the student in question may have concluded I had serious mental health problems. I can only say that experience has shown poetic guardianship of this kind to work, and that translation is one way of invoking such presences, or, more precisely, of invoking a voice.

I also have to confess that, once a translation is completed, I hardly ever go back to the original text. Having put an Akhmatova elegy or Mörike's poem about a Christmas rose into Gaelic, or a poem by Cernuda into English, my translation generally takes the place, for me, of the poem I was working from. And, as often as not, translating can be a launch pad for a new poem, as if you were to spend time carefully tuning into a radio frequency, and, having located it, were then to twiddle the button slightly and start transmitting yourself on a neighbouring, but distinct frequency. I did not translate anything into Gaelic until I was thirty, but in my early twenties I put several poems by the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal into English prose. The encounter with Hofmannsthal was prompted by hearing, just once, Act I of Richard Strauss' opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, for which he provided the libretto. The encounter with German, though, dated from my teens, when I worked my way through Wagner's Ring Cycle following the recordings in piano scores from which an English text was often missing. A long frequentation with Rilke began at the age of twenty-two and gave rise to a series of attempts at the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, one of which has found its way into print. But I lived mainly in Italy between the ages of twenty and thirty-two, and the realities I was grappling with were Italian, or, more exactly, Roman: life in a city which, in spite of its ancient antecedents, has mainly been thrown up without adequate planning or regulation in the years since 1950.

Pasolini is the poet of that city, and, as I did not then see myself leaving Italy, and believed that, if I ever managed to start writing, it would be about Rome, I rationalized translating his work as a way of finding a voice in English that would allow me to describe it. I have always liked translating as fast as possible. A condition of creative work is that you should be unaware of a part, perhaps the major part, of what you are doing, and my equivalent of that when translating was to hurry on without stopping, and only come back to evaluate what I had done at a later stage. I have never found it hard to reel off fairly regular English pentameters, and Pasolini's subject matter, in the three long poems I translated, jolted with the metrical form in a fashion I felt to be

not too different from the incongruity caused in the original by his use of hendecasyllables. Translating him, then, was consciously intended to function as a springboard.

Translation is an excellent place for metrical experiment, and this is one area where I would differ sharply from Brodsky, because the same metrical pattern does not mean the same thing in another language. Rhyming is not just materially different, but also has a different semantic value in different languages. I never did decide what would be a valid equivalent in English for Rilke's hexameters, or for the skilful representation of Latin elegiac distichs in the Catalan poet Carles Riba's *Bierville Elegies*. Translation has often made me think of a litmus test, where one dips a page into a solution it has so far not encountered, without having any idea about the colours which will result. And that is another reason why I feel it has to be done with enormous rapidity, with a minimum of control: because one is not in control of the end result – one can at best polish it or tamper with it. What matters is the transition between languages, and that is a communal rather than an individual question.

My way into writing Gaelic led via translation. On the last night of 1982, with Italian and modern Greek texts in front of me, and an English Cavafis available on the bookshelf for consultation, I put one poem by Ritsos and three by Cavafis into Gaelic and posted them off to a magazine the following day. Three years later, by which time I was once again resident in Scotland, I flew out to Italy shortly after doing some Akhmatova translations, and was so possessed by them that I was able to repeat two longish poems from memory, in Gaelic and Italian, to the friend I stayed with. When I got to the end of the second one, he leapt to his feet in alarm and begged me to stop. I think he was afraid I was going to burst a mental valve if I went on any further. My first Gaelic poems were published in the magazine *Gairm* in 1987, and, as this is a Gaelic-only publication, the issue of translations did not arise. But when the possibility of putting together a collection (the only collection I have so far published) arose, and when preparing the anthology *An Aghaidh na Siorraidheachd*, it was clear that a facing English text had to be supplied. So I would insist that self-translation has in my case always been done under duress. It has never been done with either pleasure or satisfaction. I did my best to let as long an interval as possible elapse between writing a text and translating it. I know that the attitude of other Gaelic poets is not the same. Meg Bateman, I think I am right in saying, tends to elaborate her English versions at the same time as, or immediately after, writing a poem in Gaelic. Aonghas MacNeacail regards himself as a poet in both Gaelic and English, and therefore

assigns a value to his English versions very close to that of the Gaelic poems they are derived from. I have not had the opportunity to discuss the issue with Rody Gorman, but recently a group of his poems in English appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* without any indication that a Gaelic original had preceded them, so he may be embarking on a similar course to Aonghas. Having said that, they read very like his own translations of himself, and I, for one, would be tempted to ask what is the point of using two languages, if you are going to write the same kind of poem in each.

Self-translation for me has been an activity without content, voided of all the rich echoes and interchanges I have so far attributed to the practice of translation. It is almost a question of voiding the poem of its content, which may, indeed, be the language in which it was written. Thankfully, I can cite Paul Valéry in support of my position, from the conclusion of his essay on the genesis of *Le Cimetière Marin*:

As to his interpretation of the letter, I have already explained my views on this elsewhere; but one can never insist too much upon this point: *There is no such thing as 'the real meaning' of a text.* The author has no special authority. Whatever he may have *wanted to say*, he has written what he has written. Once published, a text is, so to speak, a mechanism which everyone can use in his own way and as best he can: it is not certain that its constructor uses it better than the next man. Besides, if he really knows what he *wanted to do*, this knowledge always interferes with his perception of what he has *done*.⁵

If we take Valéry seriously (and I think we should), then the person least qualified to translate any poem is the person who wrote it.

And now I have to speak about Sorley MacLean. I began studying his poetry in 1975. Because it was not available in print I laboriously filled a notebook with transcriptions of his Gaelic verse, at a time when I had no real grasp of the language. It is not just because I love paradox that I would recommend such uncomprehending reproduction of the materiality of the text to anyone wanting to access poetry in another language. The most precious thing about poetry in a foreign language is that opaqueness, that impenetrability, the vacancy that offers one a space to fill. In the end, it is probably the same with poetry in the language or languages one has spoken since a child. What matter most are the places one cannot understand, the ones that fail to make sense, just as, when we were children, it was verbal formulae devoid of apparent meaning that fascinated us and would not let us rest. That has

⁵ Quoted from Graham Dunstan's edition and translation, *Paul Valéry: Le Cimetière Marin* (Edinburgh, 1971), p. 93.

happened to me with Brodsky: when my Russian was still rudimentary, only the opening line of a long poem was transparent to me – ‘Ty poskáchesh po mrake’, something like ‘You hop about in the darkness’. The remaining lines were a darkness I could fill with my own notion of what Brodsky’s poem was going to be like, and I have to confess that, as my Russian improved and I was able to go on, I was disappointed. Not that there was anything the matter with Brodsky’s continuation; I had simply been robbed of the imagined poem which was infinitely precious to me.

The next stage with Sorley MacLean came about seven years later, in Rome, when I put nearly all the fifty or so poems in the ‘Dàin do Eimhir’ cycle into Italian.⁶ I believe it was that experience that allowed me to become a Gaelic poet, or perhaps just to have the illusion of becoming one. There is no better form of criticism than translation, and when neither language involved carries the stigma of being the ‘mother tongue’, your perception is even more defamiliarized and acute. The practice of self-translation is never innocent, and MacLean is no exception. If translation is about crossing barriers, contaminating one language with the experience and the rhythms of another, self-translation occurs in situations of exile or of crude subjugation, where one language is attempting to take the place of another. Both Brodsky and Tsvetaeva paid a price for being surrounded by a language different from the one in which they wrote their poetry. The circumstances which led them to abandon Russia were far from innocent, and I find it hard to imagine that, had remaining there been a viable option, they would have ended up replicating their work in a Western European language out of choice.

English is a language into which remarkably little gets translated. Why then is there all this hurry to get whatever is written in Gaelic published in English as soon as possible? In case I need to spell the answer out, what matters is to dispense with the Gaelic text, to render it superfluous. In a polemical essay on three recent bilingual volumes, published in *Chapman* magazine, Wilson McLeod explains what is happening more cogently than I could ever hope to:

All the poems in all three volumes are given in Gaelic and in English, with the English on the eye-catching right, with both languages printed in the same typeface. The English texts are not described as translations of the Gaelic – their presence is not explained at all – and no translator is iden-

⁶ Thirteen of these subsequently appeared as ‘Sorley MacLean: Da Poesie a Eimhir’ in a Milan journal, *Linea d’Ombra*, 12 (1986), 52–4.

tified: one may assume that the poets themselves provided the English texts as well as the Gaelic.

Presenting this poetry in such a fashion has serious consequences. The two texts can be understood as two functionally equivalent versions of the same thing, the same ideal 'original' – the difference being essentially one of format ... Or the two texts can be seen as two distinct and different compositions, two 'originals' of essentially identical legitimacy and importance, each the fruit of the author's labour, and not necessarily dependent on each other. What no longer seems a realistic interpretation is the most obvious one – that the Gaelic texts are the originals, and their English translations are ancillary and mediated compositions in whose production 'something has been lost'.⁷

Where Sorley MacLean is concerned, the presence of the author's own English versions, like grimly haunting doubles from which his Gaelic poems no longer have any hope of being prised free, risks limiting and distorting the reception of his work. This is because they are also, inevitably, interpretations which reproduce only one of the many resonances of the text, effectively telling us what it means, with an authority we are powerless to controvert, because their source is the author. The desire to exert an improper control over texts, reflected both in peculiar publishing histories and in the question of translation, strikes me as common to Brodsky and MacLean.

But a further and equally serious problem with MacLean's English versions is the danger of manipulation. They tend to support the assumption that, since we have the poet's own translations, the originals can be dispensed with by whoever wishes to penetrate deeply into his work. This may be why the editors of the 1986 volume *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*⁸ failed to signal which of the contributors had access to MacLean's Gaelic, and which were reliant for their knowledge of his work on the available English translations. Did they think that making a distinction between the two was superfluous? If so, they were colluding in a betrayal which I see as a larger-scale betrayal, perpetrated by important segments of the intellectual class in Scotland through their ongoing refusal to acquire basic literacy in Gaelic. I cannot conceive how it is possible to write with real authority and understanding of Scottish history or culture in total ignorance of Gaelic, or, at the very least, without pointing to that space as a crucial one to which the person

⁷ Wilson McLeod, 'Packaging Gaelic Poetry', *Chapman*, 89–90 (1998), 149–51 (p. 149).

⁸ *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, edited by Raymond J. Ross and Joy Hendry (Edinburgh, 1986).

writing has no access. To claim anything else is a lie, which relies for its perpetuation on collusive silence. It is a silence I, at any rate, will not agree to observe.

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