A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

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Most people are not very translation-conscious. If a book is enjoyable and reads smoothly and understandably we do not care if it is a translation or not. If on the other hand its prose seems stilted and lacking in clarity, or contains obvious errors, we may come to suspect that the piece is not in its original form; and a hasty glance at the title-page immediately confirms our suspicion. It is a translation from another tongue, and perhaps not a very good one at that.

Now, translators are very necessary people. They hold the key to doors which allow everyone to share the written word with its beauties and knowledge: benefits which otherwise might remain possessions of the few. In this, your translator does with prose what that other valuable craftsman, the interpreter, does with the spoken word.

My own interest in translation stems (I think) from a short passage in a Russian story, "Virgin Soil", I believe, but it was a long time ago and memory may be at fault. Everything about the story is forgotten except one passage in which a man opens his front door and, as the cold air of the Russian winter night strikes him, he exclaims, "Br-r-r", rapidly in French! Such a remarkable statement can put one forever on the alert for joyous oddities of translation. On the other hand, extremely fine prose in a translated work gives the greatest pleasure and brings high respect to the translator. As Hervey Allen remarks of Baudelaire's translations of Poe into French: "In some cases the translations are thought even to have surpassed the originals."

It is an amusing exercise to choose a book which is old and important enough to have been translated several times, and to compare various versions. There are hundreds and hundreds of such books -- it is embarrass de richesse. It is best, of course, if one can compare the English translation with the original text: he can then judge the adequacy of the new text from first-hand knowledge. If one does not understand the original tongue, as is too often true, he must content himself with comparing, in English, the 'variorum' readings.

Perhaps the Greeks can boast the greatest number of translations: if one were lucky enough to have that language in his scholarly arsenal he could spend many hours comparing variations. Even without that knowledge a perusal of the English texts will repay him.

Variation, or deviation, from an original text may come about in several ways. Most obviously there are the honest mistakes. Then,
fatigue may contribute. Editing and proof-reading may not always bet-
ter the situation, as the editor may be without knowledge of the trans-
lated tongue. Again, superimposition of a rhyme-scheme on prose or
blank verse may require substitution or addition of words which strain
the sense of the original severely. And sometimes a translator may
throw himself so whole-heartedly into his work, in an attempt to im-
prove or outdo the original, that he produces most amusing variations.

Examples are in order and from the huge field we select, first, a
few readings from Sappho, the ancient Greek poetess. Some of these
illustrate well the price that may have to be paid when one wishes to
substitute rhymed verse for blank verse, or prose.

As the sweet apple blushes on the end of the bough, the very
end of the bough which the gardeners missed, may missed not,
but could not reach. (Cox)

Like the sweet apple that reddens
At the end of the bough -- far end of the bough --
Left by the gatherers swaying, forgotten, so thou.
Nay, not forgotten, unthought, ungathered till now.
(H. De Vere Stackpole)

and,
The moon has set, and the Pleiades: it is midnight, the time
is going by, and I sleep alone. (Wharton)

The moon has set, and o'er the seas
Throw their last glance the Pleiades;
The weary night is waning fast,
The promised hour is come and past;
Yet sleepless and alone I lie,
Alone -- Ah, false one, tell me why.
( Blackwood)

again,
Some say the fairest thing upon the dark earth is a host of
horsemen, and some say a host of foot-soldiers, and others
again a fleet of ships, but for me it is my beloved. (Cox)

A host of horse or foot may be
To some the fairest sight to see,
To some a fleet of ships; to me
The loved one passes all.
( Edmonds)

A beautiful voice from long ago, and still fresh. One catches the
fragrance of the Aegean. But it seems to us that some of the power and
tenderness passes with the appearance of rhyme. The Edmonds selection
in particular misses the stateliness of Cox's prose poetry and approach-
es dangerously close to the jingle.

Deserting ancient Greece and the 2500-year-old doings on the Isle
of Lesbos, we arrive in modern England where another sensitive and
talented lady named Beatrix Potter wrote and illustrated her way to
immortality which her 'Braille. It

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 grassroots variations.

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a host of and others... (Cox)

Spanish

Pituca
Pelusa
Colita Blanca
Pedrin
Tio Gregorio

Welsh

Filopsi
Mopsi
Cwta Wen
Pwta
Meistr Morus Huws

Latin

Flopsa
Mopsa
Cauda Linea
Petrus
Dominus McGregor

Italian

Saltino
Salterello
Fiocchetto
Pierino
Don Gregorio

French

Flopsaut
Trotsaut
Queue-de-Coton
Pierre
Mr. Mac Gregor

German

Flupsi
Mopsi
Quastchen
Peterchen
Herrn Krausicke

Skipping backward in time and space once more we come to sixteenth­
century France, and Rabelais. We do not know how many times his
great classic on Gargantua and Pantagruel has been translated but the
number must be very large indeed. If one has some Latin and modern
French (and a bit of imagination) the Middle French of Rabelais is
about as difficult as Chaucer. It is very useful to have the original
French text at hand when reading the English, as we have discovered;
this becomes clear in the passages that follow.

In the last book of this work we find two most colorful chapters devot­
ed to a strange chess game which followed an incredible dinner given by
La Quint Essence, the Queen, in honor of Pantagruel and his friends.
This game was played with courtiers for pieces, on a huge chess-board
of white and yellow squares. Both sides had their own orchestras and
the moves were performed to music. It is a temptation to describe the
extraordinary pageantry of the English party at greater length, but space pre­
cedes such a luxury -- and our interest, here, lies more with compara­
tive translations than with chess. Interested readers, unfamiliar with
the story, will find it in Chapters 24 and 25 of the Fifth Book.

The translations to which I have had access literally bristle with err­
rata of mis-translation, omission, and gratuitous addition. Some are

immortality. My list, made a few years ago, of the languages into
which her 'Peter' had been translated numbered seven, not including
Braille. It is quite possible that the list has grown since that time.

Just how the names of Peter and his brothers and sisters turned out as they do in translation, I know not. It seems best to simply pre­
sent the list to the reader and let him figure it out -- remembering that
the names of the protagonists, in English, are Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton­
tail, and Peter. And we must not forget Mr. McGregor. It is an inter­
esting question why Flopsy becomes Pitta in Spanish, and Saltino in
Italian. The French, Flopsaut, and the German, Flopsi, are under­
standable imitations of the English sound -- German coming the closest. The reader may also wish to speculate on why Mr. McGregor turns into
Melstr Morus Huws in Welsh, and Herrn Krausicke in German...
serious, some not, while others are droll and pleasurable. It is not recommended that one try to pick up the rudiments of chess from any of the books I have consulted -- they all contain technical errors as to the game itself. Better to use the work of the Master himself who, as far as can be observed, describes the rules of chess, and the positioning of pieces on the board exactly as we know them today.

It is hardly to be wondered at if we find a number of unfamiliar words. There can be no exact translations into English of the many incredible coinages that Rabelais himself minted. The Urquhart and Motteux translation -- among the earliest -- remains today one of the gayest and most readable. The contemporary translation of Le Clercq (for the Modern Library) is a lusty piece of scholarship, and differs from Rabelais as much as twentieth-century wit differs from sixteenth: the liveliness of one age may leave the next unresponsive. And what more natural, if one is caught up in the spirit of a work, than that he use his own more exciting, contemporary phrases?

As for errata, we do not have far to look. Key words have been underlined to aid the reader.

...they would leave their queen exposed to the adverse parties

(Urquhart)

...elles laissoient leur Roy découvert (Rabelais)

...the front rank was filled by the eight nymphs, with one square vacant between each

(Le Clercq)

Entre les deux bandes des Nymphes restolent vides quatre rancs de carreaux (Rabelais)

...striking a silvered nymph...on the right

(Urquhart)

...une Nymph argentée à gauche (Rabelais)

...thirty-two yellow personages entered

(Cohen)

...entrèrent trente-deux jeunes personnages (Rabelais)

...the kings of both armies should be besieged

(Le Clercq)

...assiéger...le Roy de part adverse (Rabelais)

Finally, lest you still think that Urquhart was a dour old Scottish scholar, this delightful example. Nymphs, if you have not already guessed it, were our pawns: here, the translator is describing their moves.

They alone never fall back (which is not very natural to other nymphs)...

Elles seules jamais ne reculent (Rabelais)

The Master did not think of the Urquhart parenthesis -- if he had, it would undoubtedly have gone into his text!

It seems fitting to end this piece with a brief note on Dr. Ash, an English clergyman of the eighteenth century. The tale is well-known but can bear mention with translation.

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but can bear repetition, I think, and it has, besides, something to do with translation.

Twenty years after Dr. Samuel Johnson published his famous "Dictionary of the English Language", Ash brought out one of his own called "A New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language" -- and, as he was not above such things, he borrowed certain etymologies from the good Doctor, his predecessor, and appropriated them to himself. All might have been well had not Ash's frantic speed made him careless at times. In due course, he came on the word Curmudgeon, which Johnson had derived from the French, coeur méchant. As this etymology had been sent to Johnson by a forgotten acquaintance, he added, in parenthesis, Unknown Correspondent. Ash, in his hasty pilfering, gave the etymology as 'coeur', unknown, 'méchant', correspondent! (The exclamation point is ours.)

Dictionaries still list the origin of Curmudgeon as unknown. It may well be that Dr. Ash has wished that he, too, might fall into that category.

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