

## A VERSION OF SCOTLAND: DON PATERSON AND TOM LEONARD'S TRANSLATIONS

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No translation can be absolutely faithful, and every act of translation affects the meaning of the translated text.

Gérard Genette (*Palimpsests* 217)

Gérard Genette raises an issue that is pertinent to all translation not just Scottish translation; the very nature of the act of translation dictates that a process of mediation will occur. The result of this is that no translation can be relied upon to reflect the source text that it is taken from and the level of mediation will be dependent upon the amount of leeway taken by the translator. This paper will take this premise and apply it to two Scottish writers, Don Paterson and Tom Leonard, in order to show how as Scottish writers they have created versions of texts that result in the means for cultural re-appropriation. Both Paterson and Leonard have translated international poets into Scots and English.

Since the majority of its potential and actual readers are users of a form of English, one may consider writing in Scots as having the effect of what Bakhtin calls 'dialogized heteroglossia', that is, utterance or writing in which there is clear friction or 'argument' between different discourses. (Crawford 9)

In the above quotation from his book *Identifying Poets*, Robert Crawford recognises the problem faced by Scottish writers: there is always an element of translation for the reader and the writer of Scottish literature. Crawford is arguing that even though a text may be written in Scots, there is always a conflict between this writing and the reading of the text, simply because the bulk of the audience for Scottish literature speak a mode of English.

In Scotland we live between and across languages....  
Few Scottish people are totally monolingual, and the  
variety of languages between and across which we live  
is increasing. (Crawford 161)

Regardless of whether a text is written in Scots or English a process of translation takes place, often this occurs on a subliminal level for the reader. The choice to write in a particular language becomes linked not only to the nationality of the writer but also the nationality of the reader. That is, the writer who deliberately chooses to write in Gaelic or Scots must also be aware that the potential audience for this writing is immediately limited and that it is dependent on the reader being able to decipher a given text into a form that is understandable for them. Furthermore the decision to write in Scots is in part determined by the cultural surroundings of the writer and the reader. In her article ‘The Search for a Native Language: Translation and Cultural Identity’, Annie Brisset views this as a positive aspect of translation:

Translation becomes an act of reclaiming, of recentering of identity, a reterritorializing operation. It does not create a new language, but it elevates a dialect to the status of a national and cultural language. (Brisset 340)

To translate from another language into Scots or to translate into a form that is recognisably Scottish elevates the identity of the target language with that of the source. Owing to this, translation is a means of reinigorating the source culture. Brisset uses the example of Quebecois, which is a dialect of French found in parts of Canada.

The existence of a such a language is also a tangible proof of the existence of a ‘Quebecois people’, This is why so much importance is placed on translation, because it proves irrefutably that the language exists. (Brisset 341)

If this line of reasoning is applied to also Scottish writing, then the very fact that people are writing in Scots and translating from other languages into both Scots and English shows that there is an interest and thus a readership for this work. Before I look at the individual poets it is necessary to look at the status of dialect writing in Scotland and in relation to Scots as a whole.

At first it seems straightforward enough to define what constitutes Scottish literature — perhaps something along the lines of writing that is written by a writer of Scottish extraction or writing from Scotland — this definition tries to be all-encompassing, as I believe that Scottish

Literature should be open to as many voices as possible. However for Scottish criticism such definitions are continually questioned. The root of this ambiguity lies in the languages available to the Scottish writer, as Christopher Whyte writes in his book *Modern Scottish Poetry*:

The step from writing histories of literature along these lines to attempting to define a Scottish tradition in literature is a very small one. Scottish literature as presently conceived, embracing work in *at least* three languages, English, Scots, and Gaelic, is a comparatively recent appearance on the critical and academic scene, and what may be termed the ‘question about Scottishness’ has occupied a central role in deciding precisely what Scottish literature might be. (Whyte 11, my emphasis)

For Whyte Scottish literature comprises of ‘at least three languages’. This implies that Scottish literature is multilingual and yet poses an interesting question: where does dialect writing fit into a trilingual literature?

A more linguistic approach to language proves profitable. In his book *The English Language in Scotland: An Introduction to Scots* Charles Jones demonstrates this point with regard to Modern Scots:

Perhaps the most neutral description of the linguistic entity called Modern Scots is as *the principle linguistic medium of face-to-face communication used by the vast majority of speakers who live within the boundaries of Scotland*. (Jones 1)

The difficulties begin to arise when the spoken word is written down. Languages rely on having a standard written form in order to achieve communication, and as dialects are primarily spoken they do not have the same level of standardisation. Jones highlights this problem as follows:

Language planners often seek to establish the credibility of revitalised languages by inventing for them their own special orthographic form, on the basis that a language can only successfully exist if it has a standard written format.... In the case of Scots, an attempt has been made by organisations such as the

Scots Language Society to produce just such a standard orthography for what they perceive as the uniquely identifiable language — Scots.... The difficulties associated with such attempts at revival and retention through the standardisation of orthographies are many. In the first place we need to ask just what group of native Scots speakers in Scotland uses language like this? (Jones 5–6)

A language should reflect its speakers. However, promoting a standardised form of Scots inadvertently creates a hierarchy, with the accepted standardised form being held in higher regard than the variations that are spoken. And as a result, when attempts are made to represent these forms of Scots on the page, assessments are made that focus on the form rather than the literary worth of the given text.

Both Paterson and Leonard have both employed what can be termed Urban Scots, they do not follow any standardised form of Scots, instead they rely on a phonetic representation of actual speech. I believe that these forms of Scots are as acceptable a medium for Scottish writers as writing in traditional Scots. I also suggest that losing any distinctions between accent, dialect and Scots can help to develop this further. I see all three as part of the same whole, that is, writing that is in either an accent or a dialect or more formal Scots are all Scottish, and it is this distinction that should be preserved in relation to writing in English. However that is not to say that writing from Scottish authors that is written in English is not as acceptable as that written in Scots, but rather that the umbrella that is Scots will contain elements of accent, dialect and Scots, for that is what allows Scots to be considered a language, and none should be excluded in preference of the others.

If Scots does not accept that it needs to evolve it runs the risk of parochialism. It has to reflect the language and voices that are actually being spoken within the society that its literature represents. As if to demonstrate this Crawford rejects the contention that Tom Leonard is writing English with a Scottish accent:

Clearly Leonard is not writing in English...Leonard's language is likely to be spurned by those who wish to have a pure Scots of the sort found in the *Scottish National Dictionary*.... As a working-class Glaswegian Leonard has complained that 'I turn off when people say "Is it dialect or patois?" because inevitably behind that there's a hierarchy going on'.... (Jones 168)

So, to take Crawford's lead, writing in an accent, whether urban or regional is an acceptable ingredient that makes up the larger entirety of the Scots Language.

Don Paterson regularly translates or creates versions of other European poets' work. In the afterword to his collection *The Eyes*, a collection that consists entirely of Paterson's 'versions' of Antonio Machado, Paterson insists that

these poems are versions, not translations. A reader looking for an accurate translation of Antonio Machado's *words*, then, should stop here and go out and by another book. (Paterson, *The Eyes* 55)

So what is the distinction between translation and a version? Paterson claims that a 'literal translation can be useful in providing a snapshot of the original, but a *version* — however subjectively — seeks to restore a light and colour and perspective' (Paterson, *The Eyes* 57–58). In order to illustrate this distinction one need only look at 'Morning Prayer (After Rimbaud)' from *Nil, Nil*, which seems to be a translation of 'Oraison Du Soir'.

Oliver Bernard's translation is just that, a very literal translation from French to English (see Rimbaud). Of course this is perfectly valid, as it does not claim to be anything else. Paterson's version on the other hand does take poetic licence as he makes some major changes from the original text to his own.

The most obvious difference between the two poems is in their titles. Paterson shifts the temporality of the poem from evening or *soir* to morning. Rimbaud's poem takes place before he goes to bed while Paterson's is concerned with waking in the morning.

Paterson does not render the poem in literal English, nor does he use Scots; rather he employs a turn of phrase that is recognisably Scottish without fully adopting a dialectal voice. Phrases such as 'like an angel in the hand's of the barbers' and 'like the warm excrements in an old dovecote' are replaced with 'like an angel at the barbers' and 'on the midden of desire' — *midden* being a Scottish word for a dung-heap. Paterson manages to relocate the action of the poem from Paris to a bar in Scotland as the narrator of the poem watches himself drinking his beer in the 'gantry mirror' of the pub. Even the measures of the drink are updated with 'thirty or forty tankards' becoming of 'fifteen or twenty pints'.

But perhaps the most Scottish interjection occurs with the replacement of the word ‘piss’ with ‘pish’ at line 13. This is not to say that the poem adopts any sense of nationalism other than revelling in the sound of the word, for the voice of the poem there is no more appropriate word than ‘pish’. The sound of the word is softer than the harsh ‘piss’ and begins the consonance repeated through words like ‘gloriously’, ‘skies’, ‘spattered ferns’ and ‘assent’ of the last two lines. The experiences of the poem are similar in both Bernard’s and Paterson’s versions — the narrator in a moment of maudlin introspectiveness evaluates his life while sitting in a bar drinking heavily. The only thing that rouses them from this state is the need to urinate.

Paterson’s re-appropriation of Rimbaud is similar to Tom Leonard’s reworking of William Carlos Williams in ‘Jist Ti Let Yi No’. Tom Leonard places particular emphasis on the voice in his poetry and he demonstrates the arguments that he makes in his non-fiction writing. His essay ‘The Locust Tree in Flower, and Why it Had Difficulty Flowering in Britain’ discusses the poetry of William Carlos Williams and begins:

What I like about Williams is his voice. What I like about Williams is his presentation of voice as a fact, as a fact in itself and as a factor in his relationship with the world as he heard it, listened to it, spoke it. (Leonard 95)

Not only does Leonard follow Williams’ presentation of the voice but it also seems that Williams’ search to find a way of speaking in a poem that reflects American interests rather than English has been adopted by Leonard in his Glaswegian poems. The most obvious example of this occurs in Leonard’s update of Williams’ poem ‘This is Just to Say’.

Leonard rewrites William’s poem in a Glaswegian accent. He stresses that Williams’ poem is ‘from the American’ which serves to indicate that it is this American voice that Leonard is acknowledging. Leonard’s version of the poem is not so much a rewriting than a re-appropriation of the text into his own cultural voice. The action of the poem clearly shifts from America to Glasgow. And in order to show this Leonard chooses to change the plums in Williams’ poem to the more stereotypical ‘speshlz’, which can only be the cans of special fondly consumed by drinkers in Scotland. Furthermore the most common brand of special would have been Youngers Tartan Special and this only serves to reinforce the clichéd nature of the cultural stereotypes employed by Leonard. The Tartan Special can itself could not be any more clichéd, as it pictures a bearded man raising his glass of beer on a tartan

background. Leonard's reference to special could be read as a veiled criticism of the traditional 'shortbread tin' image of Scotland.

Theoretically Williams and Leonard seem to be approaching poetry and writing from the same starting-point:

I came to look at poetry from a local viewpoint; I had to find out for myself; I'd had no instruction beyond high school literature. When I was inclined to write a poem, I was very definitely an American kid, confident of himself and also independent. From the beginning I felt I was *not* English. If poetry had to be written, I had to do it my own way. (Williams, *I Wanted To Write A Poem* 14)

This passage is from Williams's *I Wanted to Write a Poem* and could very easily have come from a piece of Leonard's criticism. When one looks at Leonard's poetry, it is apparent that he follows a similar line structure to that of Carlos Williams.

Leonard often demonstrates a grasp of two differing registers within the same poem. And this is something that can be observed throughout his work. A very obvious example of this is in the titles he offers for his Scots poems. The majority of those that are assigned titles have English titles and a main body that is in Scots, this never happens the other way round — English poems always have English titles. By giving his dialect poems an English title he is engaging with the reader by drawing them into the poem. Although they may not understand the actual poem at first they are left with an impression of what the actual poem is concerned with. Leonard's work is complex: his writing continually addresses the compromises made in order to represent speech on the written page. Roderick Watson engages with this idea in his book *The Literature of Scotland*

[Leonard's poetry] catches the rhythms and nuances of actual utterance when read aloud, but which seems radically estranged on the page in its written form. One effect of this is to make the educated English speaker 'illiterate' again as he or she struggles to decode the printed word. (Watson 296)

The point is regardless of whether he is writing in dialect or not Leonard's work is less about how the work is written on the page than how it sounds when read out loud. To this end he continually transcribes

words on the page in a variety of ways. On the one hand this can often provide the reader with double meanings, while on the other it seems as if Leonard is consciously making the decision not to worry about inconsistencies when the words are written down.

Umberto Eco recognises the difficulty of translation, which holds true for both Leonard and Paterson:

It seems to me that the idea of translation as a process of negotiation is the only one that matches our experience. (Eco 34)

What Leonard and Paterson are actively participating in is not translation as such, but more rewriting of a text into a different cultural context. So rather than merely translating the French or the American into English both authors have to take into account what the words mean when read in their original context, and interpret what these words will mean for themselves and thus the reader of their texts.

In a review of *The Eyes* poet John Burnside recognises Paterson's affiliation with Machado:

In some ways, it should come as no surprise that his versions of Machado feel so right (right rather than accurate, or correct, as it were — for he (Paterson) is quite prepared to compromise the letter of the text in order to convey the spirit of the poem). (Burnside §)

This argument holds true for all of Paterson's translations of other's work. Unlike Bernard he is not producing literal translation, but rather the reader is given what Paterson terms as a 'version' that seems to retain the poetry of the original. Paterson sees his 'versions' as

trying to be poem in their own right; while they have the original to serve as a detailed ground-plan and elevation, they are trying to build themselves a robust home in a new country, in its vernacular architecture, with local words for its brick and local music for its mortar. (Patterson, *Orpheus* 73)

Extended metaphors aside, Paterson sees translation as a means of rewriting a poem into another culture and as such his emphasis on vernacular and the local allow him to rewrite a poem for his own means.

Paterson and Leonard's re-appropriation of international poetry allows their work to be viewed in a more international context. Yet both writers do not allow the international to detract from the local. Even in 'Morning Prayer' Paterson successfully shifts the action of the poem from Rimbaud's decadent Paris to Scotland. This is demonstrated by the changes in language that I have discussed, but also in the choice of changing 'heliotropes' to 'ferns' in the last line — ferns seem far more everyday for a Scottish writer than heliotropes.

Translation is inextricably linked to the culture of the language that the text is translated into and to the readers that it is intended for. Umberto Eco explains this relationship in the following terms:

Translation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures — or two encyclopaedias. A translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural. (Eco 82)

For Eco the role of the translator is more unpredictable than merely rendering the text literally from one language to another, rather it is imperative that a translator takes account of not only the language that they are translating into but also the culture of the received text. In the case of Paterson this means that

translation becomes one of the means by which a new nation 'proves' itself, shows that its language is capable of rendering what is rendered in more prestigious languages. (Bassett and Lefevere 8)

Paterson and Leonard's use of the local and dialect can be viewed as a reclamation of other literatures translated into their own culture. Paterson touches upon this in the appendix to *Orpheus*, his translation of Rilke, stating that 'the translated poem can be translated not just into the language but the *culture* of the age, whenever that culture deems it necessary' (73). Translation has to be sympathetic to the needs of society and its literature.

It seems to me that it is neither the voice of the translated poet nor the voice of the translating poet that is prevalent within a translation, but rather it is the text necessitated by the given culture. Robert Crawford believes that 'Modern poetry in Scots is rich because it utilizes its own uncertain status' (163). This is particularly pertinent for Paterson and Leonard, as the writers do not involve themselves with arguments over

language; rather, they write within whichever language/dialect fits the particular poem.

Their versions are validated as they retain enough of the ‘poetic’ to allow the audience to accept the poems as if they were written by the poet. And yet they retain enough of the original work to be regarded as translations in their own right.

Translation is an important theme within the context of Scottish literature. As I said earlier to read a work written in Scots or English requires a degree of translation on the reader’s behalf. All too often, debates focus on whether Scots can be considered a language in its own right; however it is more pertinent that there is such a debate. Scottish writers find themselves in the privileged position of having multiple languages or dialects to write in and thus multiple readers of languages and dialects to read their work. Scottish literature is vibrant and Don Paterson and Tom Leonard represent only a small aspect of the work that is being written and read in Scotland. And so it is more beneficial to concentrate on the multiplicity of writers and writing that make up Scottish literature.

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