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La Musique Dunbarienne of Jean-Jacques Blanchot

“Not Burns, Dunbar”: this was Hugh MacDiarmid’s slogan in the mid-1920s when he wanted to encourage Scottish poets to write a witty, urban, and unsentimental poetry as part of a twentieth-century Scottish renaissance in their art, and incidentally announce the program of what he wanted to produce himself. It has taken some time for translators to respond to MacDiarmid’s summons, in contrast to the continuing spate of translations of Burns, with 3029 titles listed as published from 1795 up to 2003, according to the online bibliographic information available from the National Library of Scotland on the BOSLIT website.¹ Modern titles include Samuel Marshak’s Russian version of Burns, 1947; Toshio Nanba or Namba’s in Japanese, 1969; Roderick Macdonald’s complete poems in Gaelic, 1992; and Luiza Lobo’s in Brazilian Portuguese, 1994.²

In contrast, the BOSLIT website and Blanchot’s book together with his bibliography provide information about thirty-three separate titles presenting translations of Dunbar, also up to 2003. These begin with George Buchanan’s “Somnium” (c. 1535), a free Latin version of part of “This hinder nycht befor

¹Bibliography of Scottish Literature in Translation: <http://boslit.nls.uk>

²<http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/britlit/burns/burns8.html>

the dawing cleir.”³ Buchanan’s text is an expansion of the ideas in Dunbar’s poem, aimed at developing an original satire on Franciscans.⁴ A Serbo-Croatian version of selections from “The Thistle and the Rose” (B 52) appeared in 1868, and from 1933 on there was a slowly gathering stream of translations of individual poems into Esperanto and English, also the following European languages: French, Polish, Dutch, Hungarian, Slovenian, Swedish, and Italian.

But Jean-Jacques Blanchot, who has devoted many years to a close study of Dunbar’s language and poetry, has not flinched from the task of rendering into modern French the eighty-four poems, many of them extremely complex and demanding, included by Priscilla Bawcutt in the canon.⁵ A point made by Blanchot is that Dunbar is the only Scottish poet of the early sixteenth century worthy to be set beside his Continental contemporaries, including the “Grands Rhétoriciens,” who may well have provided inspiration for him, for example, Jean Meschinot (d. 1490), Jean Molinet (d. 1507), and Guillaume Crétin (d. 1525). Active as court poets in Northern France, Flanders, and the Duchy of Burgundy, these poets are dissimilar in many ways, but share a common interest in complicated forms and experiments with sound. Their texts at times allow multiple readings, a notable feature of the polyphonic music and religious art of the Burgundian and Netherlandish Schools, whose aesthetic influence spread to Scotland. Dunbar’s poetry has analogous features, and may spring from a similar sensibility to that of the “Rhétoriciens.” Blanchot, following up his publication of four poems in French in 1995, provides an inspiration to French poets and poet-translators who are our contemporaries, and encourages them by his example to revisit old themes and experiment with old forms relished by the lively and polyglot court of James IV of Scotland.

It is notable that Blanchot does not follow Bawcutt’s order of the poems determined by the alphabetical order of their first lines. Her “neutral arrangement” (1998: i.21) avoids difficulties of other systems, based on decisions about theme or type or mood, or a combination of all of these, but her organization is inconvenient for the reader wishing to consider together poems that are companion pieces or interconnected in some way.⁶ Adopting a scheme of

³*The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1998), poem B 77. Further references to Dunbar poems will cite the Bawcutt arrangement.

⁴Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat. 8140 ff.11r-13v; Philip J. Ford, *George Buchanan: Prince of Poets*, with an edn. of the *Miscellaneorum Liber*, ed. Ford and W. S. Watt (Aberdeen, 1982), pp. 49-54, 123.

⁵Jean-Jacques Blanchot, *William Dunbar 1460?–1520? Poète de Cour écossais*, Poèmes présentés, traduits et annotés (Grenoble, 2003).

⁶William Dunbar, *The Complete Works*, ed. John Conlee (Kalamazoo, 2004), p. 6, Medieval Institute Publications, 6.

organizing poems by type, Blanchot established the following six sections:

1. Célébrations (10 poems)
2. Exhortations (17)
3. Prières (8)
4. Fantaisies satiriques (18)
5. Vitupérations (13)
6. Réflexions (18)

This arrangement has the great merit of juxtaposing in Section 1 the remarkable poems in Dunbar's aureate style of a sacred nature, such as "Hymne au Christ ressuscité" (B 10), "Hymne de Noël" (B 58), and "Hymne à la Vierge" (B 16), with secular examples, such as "Le Chardon et la Rose" (B 52), and celebrations such as "Compliment à la Reine d'Ecosse" (B 15) and "Entrée de la Reine à Aberdeen" (B 8). The sober exhortations of the second section, which recommend a moral life over worldly attractions, include earnest recommendations to proceed with discretion and avoid cupidity, also the advice of a learned poet addressing scholars: "Vaine est la science, sans les bonnes œuvres" (B 82). Section 3 presents Dunbar's "prayers" about his benefice, also his contrition and penitence, as well as his touching and amusing, self-mocking pleas to his master James IV at Christmas, not to neglect him as a worn-out hack, but to be kind and generous to this faithful "Vieux Cheval" (B 66). For some French readers, the Dunbar of the "Fantaisies satiriques" in Section 4 will provide the most uproarious poetic experiences, whether in the plethora of insults of the "Tournoi invectif" with Kennedy (B 65), or the macabre, sadistic, and scatological weirdness of the "Danse des Sept Péchés et tournoi carnavalesque" (B 47). This poem ends in broad excremental farce, when the Devil turns his backside on the newly-knighted cobbler, and befouls him from neck to heel striking him and his horse to the earth with a tremendous fart:

Il tourna son cul et le conchia
De la tête jusques aux pieds.

Il se lâcha avec tant de violence
Qu'homme et monture en furent renversés,
Ce fut un pet époustouflant (pp. 144-5).

The "Vitupérations" of Section 5 include the example of Dunbar, "prône la rigueur et la sévérité" (p. 201, n. 96), railing against the "très dangereux traître, Donald Owr" (B 27), the bastard son of the bastard son of the last legitimate Macdonald Lord of the Isles. The Lowland poet in the Stewart king's pay naturally abhors this Highland rebel and traitor who, though pardoned, is ready once more to take up arms. Perhaps the most adroit example of this type of poem is the sustained attack on false values found in "Contre l'incurie des

édiles d'Édimbourg" (B 55). The moral onslaught is directed at shaming the merchants who control the town council, and allow stench, squalor, and maimed people to take over the streets of the capital. The city fathers of the capital confine themselves to making money, and never consider reform that would advance the common good and create a better reputation:

Vos profits sont toujours plus abondants
 Mais vos mérites de plus en plus rares.
 Nul n'arrive à circuler dans les rues
 Où règnent bossus, boiteux et aveugles.
 N'êtes-vous pas honteux,
 D'avoir autant d'argent et de richesse
 Sans vous assurer un meilleur renom? (pp. 199-200).

In "Réflexions," the final section, "La Targe d'Or: la raison aveuglée par l'amour" (B 59) offers in richly aureate terms a psychomachia which, true to convention, presents erotic love discomfiting "Raison," because the golden shield, perhaps chastity, offers no protection against "Contact." Of course, more important is the demonstration of the art of poetry which concludes the poem, drawing attention to the tradition in which Dunbar writes, that of "prestigieux Chaucer...très édifiant Gower et célèbre Lydgate," and modestly dismissing the poet's own "petit livre":

Grossière est ta robe, tachée et déchirée,
 Tu aurais bien raison de craindre la lumière (p. 223).

In sardonic contrast, there is the "Récit des deux épouses et de la veuve" (B 3), in which the married interlocutors, gold and green in appearance, in the green and gold setting of medieval love poetry, recount their disappointing experience in sexual love, not in the ornate stanzas of the French romance of the rose tradition, but in the long alliterative line of northern narrative. The "éloquente veuve" responds with a sermon presenting "la légende" of her life, testifying how she handled her unsatisfactory husbands, and then enjoyed carnal love to the utmost outside marriage. So captivating through her tact and sweetness were the words she addressed to each visitor separately, and so tender was her heart, that no one who would have died without sleeping with her was in danger of perishing:

À chaque visiteur séparément j'adresse quelques mots
 Avec tant de tact et de douceur qu'ils en sont tous captivés.
 Il n'est pas d'homme en ce monde, si modeste en son état,
 Qui m'aimera sans être aimé en retour, j'ai le cœur trop tendre.
 Et s'il est si épris de la laiteuse blancheur de ma peau
 Qu'il périra s'il ne couche avec moi, il restera en vie (p. 247).

Fittingly, the last poem in this section and the volume is the *Timor Mortis* (B 21), so salutary to us all:

Notre confort ici est fausse gloire,
Ce monde trompeur n'est que transitoire,
La chair est faible et l'ennemi rusé:
Timor mortis conturbat me (p. 269).

In Blanchot's opinion, the greatest difficulty facing the translator of Dunbar is his language, with its diverse linguistic roots, and extensive as well as demanding vocabulary, which is nevertheless a "language of terror, colourful, savoury, very much linked to daily experience" (p. 12). But after this language reached maturity in the sixteenth century, Blanchot suggests, it was degraded by the provincialization of Scotland following the Presbyterian Reformation and the Union of the Crowns. It is so far from contemporary usage, however, that the majority of Scots have a great deal of trouble in reading Dunbar and the other great poets from distant ages. Despite the efforts of historians, details of the social and cultural context pose problems, and many references and allusions remain obscure. As well, another difficulty lies in the style of Dunbar: "dense and image-filled, charged with subtle connotations, alternating or mingling with virtuosity all the registers of the Scots language of the Court, the town and the country—courtly, juridical, familiar, and common" (pp. 11-12), as well as liturgical and dog Latin. Indeed, Dunbar, like the "Grand Rhétoriciens," is fascinated with *copia*, richness of meaning, allusiveness, and variety of expressiveness, available through exploiting to the full all the resources available from the different class and gender components of a language. If the register of classical French poetry suited the allegorical poems, those expressed in everyday or coarse language called for a free adaptation, and recourse to contemporary slang. A case in point is the word "fukkit" in the poem, "In secrete place this hyndir nycht" (B 25, l. 13). This was believed to be the word's first recorded literary use, but what appears to be an earlier one occurred in MS Peniarth 356B: f. 149v, ll. 1-4 (National Library of Wales):

Wemen were wode and sweryne by the rode
That thay owyles fuc ne men
Men were wys and turnyd her geryes
And swuyud ham (Conlee 2004: 367, l. 13 gloss).

Blanchot translates by using the verb "tringler," which at a first level means "to chalk a line on," but which the Oxford-Hachette *French Dictionary* (2004) also denotes as a vulgar or taboo word meaning "to fuck." Blanchot observes in his gloss (p. 147) it seemed convenient to render the expression's crudity through using contemporary slang.

Blanchot also points out that that interpretation of meaning is linked to the artifices of fiction, and to the choice of metrical forms, which raises yet an-

other difficulty for the translator: how is Dunbar's expertise in metrics to be recreated? To translate Dunbar into prose would have been flagrant injury, while the exigencies of rhyme would have been insurmountable. The solution had to find middle ground through combining quantitative verse and rhythm. Accordingly, pentameters were chosen for four-stress verse, and the alexandrine for five-stress verses. Occasionally, a trimeter line is alternated with octosyllabics to provide something like *rime couée*, a tail-rhyme stanza. This form concludes with a short line rhyming with a previous short one, separated from it, however, sometimes by one long line, sometimes by two or three. According to Littré's *Dictionnaire* (1889), the obsolete term "couée" is derived from the language of hunting, and refers to an animal's undocked tail. In his guidebook for Scottish poets, *Reulis and Cautelis* (1584), James IV described this as the "cuttit and brokin verse," which he recommended as suitable for presenting "love materis." There is a long tradition of use of *rime couée* in French, and Victor Hugo provides an excellent example in his poem, *A l'Obéissance passive* :

Contre toute l'Europe avec ses capitaines,
 Avec ses fantassins couvrant au loin les plaines,
 Avec ses cavaliers,
 Tout entière debout comme une hydre vivante,
 Ils chantaient, ils allaient, l'âme sans épouvante
 Et les pieds sans souliers.⁷

Blanchot applies the term *rime couée* to the specific example of Dunbar's "Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins," and explains in a note that his translation is devised to convey metrically the springing effect of this kind of stanza construction (a4a4b3 c4c4b3 / d4d4b3 e4e4b3), through alternating two lines of decasyllabics with a line of octosyllabics:

De Février la quinziesme nuit
 Longtemps avant que ne naisse le jour,
 Au lit me vint une vision,
 Et m'apparurent le Ciel et l'Enfer.
 Je crus qu'avec les démons déchainés
 Satan conduisait un ballet
 De pervers indignes de tout pardon,
 Lors des festivités du Mardi-Gras
 En guise de célébration.
 Il fit préparer une mascarade
 Et force gambades et galipettes
 À la dernière mode de France (p. 137).

⁷Victor Hugo, *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. Francis Bouvet (Paris, 1964), p. 289.

In his Introduction, Blanchot affirms that the rule he followed was to privilege the particular tone of each one of the poems he translated, through seeking to combine all the resources of the francophone language and tradition. He had to give up a superficial exactitude to restore Dunbar's spirit and strength, and abridge certain formulae or eliminate redundancy to stick to the metrical scheme chosen. Above all, his inspiration in seeking to create appropriate metrical effects was "la musique dunbarienne." His greatest challenge came in the "Hymne à la Vierge" (B 16), which he found the most difficult of Dunbar's poems to translate because of the virtuosity of its technique. This produces seven stanzas employing the module a5b6, constructed round the repeated Angelic Salutation: *Ave, Maria, gracia plena*, in which key lines are embellished with triple internal rhymes and supplementary alliteration. In addition to the intricate musical effects of his poem of veneration for the Virgin, Dunbar lovingly decorates his praise of the Queen of Heaven with beautiful star, flower, and songbird imagery. Responding to this amazing achievement Blanchot offers five stanzas of alternating unrhymed decasyllables and octosyllables, enriched with alliteration and assonance, prefacing two that confidently include end and internal rhymes, with stanza 6 a veritable *tour de force*:

Prestigieuse et puissante impératrice,
Si rayonnante pierre rare,
Victorieuse du vice, génitrice
De Jésus, souverain seigneur,
Écu de vertu envers les intrus,
Contre les suppôts du démon,
Oratrice, médiatrice, salvatrice,
Et divine coadjutrice.
Ave Maria, gracia plena.
Salut, étoile méridienne,
Douce épice et sublime fleur de lis,
Qui porta la graine de gloire (pp. 22-3).

Blanchot admits that translating such a poet both learned and varied was an enterprise doomed to half failure and half success. As a translator, he wishes to disprove the adage, and avoid betraying Dunbar's tone. Transmuting Dunbar's writing was a process at once frustrating and exalting. For him, it was a case of humility and elation. If the French reader takes some pleasure in discovering this eminent poet, Blanchot says he will be amply repaid for his pains. It can also be said that the reader familiar with Dunbar's poetry in the Middle Scots original will find much to delight and instruct him in the skill and sensitivity of Blanchot's rendition of Dunbar, and in the judicious notes which illuminate the text.