Two Versions of Ulysses' Last Voyage

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Two Versions of Ulysses' Last Voyage

A minor poet translating the work of a minor poet has at least some chance of success: he may well produce a version as good as his original, though its goodness will necessarily be of a different kind, and with luck he may effect an improvement. But anyone who tries to translate Dante is fighting a losing battle from the start: what gives the battle its fascination is the virtual impossibility of maintaining a balance between the effort to make a representation of as many as possible of Dante's qualities and the effort to write a contemporary verse which is not only "acceptable" in a negative sense but also satisfying in a positive sense. Scholarship and craft, teaching and creating, are odd bedfellows. When a sympathetic scholar translates a foreign poet the result is rarely admirable as verse; and verse cannot even be said to be readable if one has continually to make allowances, if one never forgets that it is "just" translation. But on the rare occasions when a good poet who is also a competent scholar translates a foreign poet the result is quite different from translation as such. A man who is a good poet in his own right is too much of an individual not to transform the original into something manifestly his own. A good poet's version or adaptation of another good poet is worth any amount of everyday "translation," yet when translation as such is being considered it is as irrelevant in one direction as the explanations of the scholar are in another.

I want to compare two fairly recent translations of the last voyage of Ulysses, from the second half of Canto 26 of the Inferno. The first is by a scholar—Dorothy L. Sayers—and is to be found in her Penguin translation (Harmondsworth, 1949); the second is by a poet—Tom Scott—and is to be found in his Oxford University Press volume The Ship and other poems (London, 1963). I must emphasize that I am not comparing Miss Sayers and Mr. Scott as translators of Dante for we would need much more by Mr. Scott to support such an exercise: I am simply comparing two versions of half a canto. Both versions are good of their kind, both achieve a certain balance between the claims of
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scholarship and the claims of verse-writing, and a comparison illustrates two of the many fundamental problems of translating Dante—the problems of verse-structure and of diction.

In terza rima, verse-structure means rhyme. The rhymes anchor each line and give the verses their shape. Miss Sayers wrote in her introduction:

By overtrunning and light rhyming, the terza rima can be made to run almost continuously; or, by end-stopping and conspicuous rhyming, it can be broken at will into stanza-form; and it can be carried from the one rhythm to the other by the linked rhyme without for a moment losing the strong forward movement of the verse . . . (P. 56).

So Miss Sayers came down for "terza rima or nothing" and argued her case cogently. She denied the allegation that sufficient rhymes cannot be found in English and cited the Spenserian stanza as an even more exacting form. I have two doubts here. For one, Spenser's verse has on the whole a much looser texture than Dante's and Spenser made much more use of certain little tags which while not adding a great deal in the way of meaning were useful to call in when rhyming difficulties became awkward. More important, the kind of words which rhyme in Italian are often more functional than the kind of words which rhyme in English: inflected verbs and nouns with gender endings, for instance, supple rhymes which are ideal for terza rima in that the rhymes (already prominent per se) can be made to carry the action of the verse. The result can be a stanza with a firm backbone and a clearcut shape; sometimes, even, Dante's rhymes by themselves can give a summary of what is happening.

For:

Quando
mi diparti' da Circe, che sostrasse
me piu d'un anno lè presso a Gaeta,
prima che si Enea la nomasse,

Miss Sayers gives:

When I came
From Circe at last, who would not let me go,
But twelve months near Caieta hindered me
Before Aeneas ever named it so,

For the first rhyme she succeeds in getting the verb into the prominent position, but at the expense of turning the positive "sostrasse" into the negative and weaker "would not let . . . go." In l. 93 in the Italian the words are ordered quite naturally in relation to the rhyming verb "nomasse": Miss Sayers gets the rhyme but has to be content with a
much less important word and consequently a line which feels less inevitable.

... né 'l debito amore
lo qual doveva Penelope far lieta,
vincer poter dentro da me l'ardore
ch'i ebbe a divenir del mondo esperro,

"amore" and "ardore" not only rhyme, not only operate as key-words, but also in this context make emphatic the contrast between what holds Ulysses back and what drives him forward. A translation which sacrifices this point sacrifices a great deal.

... not the wedded love
That should have comforted Penelope
Could conquer in me the restless itch to rove
And rummage through the world exploring it,

At the cost of a slight juggle Miss Sayers manages to keep the point.

L'un tio e l'altro vidi infìn la Spagna,
fin nel Morroco, e l'isola de' Sardi,
e l'altre che quel mare intorno bagna.

L. 105 moves inevitably to the rhyming verb and the action of the water is what the line principally makes us aware of.

Far as Morocca, far as Spain I scanned
Both shores; I saw the island of the Sardi,
And all that sea, and every wave-girt land.

The echo of "l'un . . . e l'altro" is well caught in "far as . . . far as," but the verse ends weakly. For the sake of a rhyme with "scanned" (a good word here) we have to make do with "land," and the action of the sea, so important here, is lost in the archaic cliché "wave-girt." The loss is not made good by letting the sea, a subject to Dante's "bagna," stand as object to Miss Sayers' extra "saw."

Mr. Scott decided to do without rhyme. In theory I would not agree with this because rhyme is so fundamental to the texture and movement of Dante's verse, but in practice, if there are compensating virtues, the absence of rhyme may be justified. The three instances I have given from Miss Sayers should indicate the kind of sacrifices which often have to be made simply to achieve a rhyme. In any kind of verse, rhymes must feel inevitable, as if they had simply grown in the places they were meant to grow in, despite any difficulties the poet may have encountered in achieving this. But if these difficulties are apparent in the finished work, if the verse feels as if it has been pulled out of shape, even slightly, to manœuvre the rhyme-word into place,
then the rhymes merely stick out like sore thumbs. Considering the vast quantity of rhymes that Miss Sayers had to handle in the entire Divine Comedy it is a tribute to her skill and industry that she succeeded as far as she did.

In the half canto that he gives us, Mr. Scott uses an unrhymed, three-line stanza: it keeps pace with Dante's verse, often line for line, and the frequent pause at the end of the third line keeps the verse in shape. Lines run on, of course, as they do in the original, but this needs careful control: when Dante runs on there is always a rhyme to counteract this and preserve balance.

Here are Mr. Scott's equivalents for the passages already quoted:

When
I took my way, then thon Circe, who
Near Gaeta, had abuin a year back held me,
Lang or linie gied the place its name,

... nor yet the aucth love
That should hae made Penelope sac crouse,
Could get the better in me o the yare
I had for mair experience o life,

I saw baith the shores as hyne as Spain
And as Morocco, and the inch Sardinia,
And ither isles that thon sea synds around.

In each case the movement of the verse is easier and smoother, the clauses slip into place more inevitably, and without the necessity to fit into a rhyme-scheme the crucial words find the right places more readily. "Amore" and "ardore" become "love" and "yare" (yearning, longing): the two abstract nouns remain abstract nouns and keep their important places, sacrificing the rhyme but preserving much else. In l. 105 the action of the sea is predominant, as it is in the original, and again this compensates for the loss of rhyme.

In the translation of any poet who lived in another age, the problem of diction is the most vexing. Miss Sayers, as could have been expected, states her position clearly:

I have considered the whole range of intelligible English speech to be open to me, excluding, however, at one end of the scale, words and forms so archaic as to be incomprehensible, and, at the other, 'nonce-words' and up-to-the-minute slang . . . I have tried to avoid, as far as possible, Latinized inversions (especially when they involve ambiguity), poetic cliches, and sudden drops into slang or bathos—bearing in mind, however, that Dante's own style moves continually from the grand manner to the colloquial, and that nothing could be more unfair to him,
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or more unlike him, than to iron out all his lively irregularities into one flat level of dignified commonplace. (Pp. 60-61)

The intention could not be better and no great blame should be attached to a performance which does not quite live up to such an ideal. In the lines already quoted "wave-girt" (105) is a poetic cliché as dead as any. In 97-98:

...the restless itch to rove
And rummage through the world exploring it,

"rummage" seems wrong for two reasons: there is no need to be colloquial here, and anyway the word has the wrong associations—you rummage through an untidy drawer for something you have lost.

a divenir del mondo esperto

is simple and direct; so is Mr. Scott's line.

How Mr. Scott's language reads to an Englishman I could not say: I find it highly satisfactory. It avoids the two extremes apparent in much Scots writing of the present century: on the one hand the thickly wrought, synthetic, avowedly literary language of those who have tried to write in a modern equivalent of Dunbar's idiom, and on the other hand the dilute, Anglicized language of those who think in English but go through the motions of writing in Scots. I doubt (despite the opposition) if Scots has much future as the language of a possible body of literature—as distinct from good individual works, of which this century has seen not a few. But as a secondary language, a language for translation and adaptation, I believe it still has great potentialities. Scots is vivid and particular in a way which English cannot be; the sheer physical force of the elements, the touch and colour of landscape, the energy of wind and water, are alive in Scots vocabulary in a way which frequently shows the English equivalents to be quite pale. This is what makes Gavin Douglas' version of, say, the sea passages and storms, from Virgil so much more concrete and energetic than any English translation has done.

It would be absurd to argue that Scots is a better language than English to translate Dante into—in general—though I would like someone to prove me wrong. In the present case at any rate some advantages are certain. In 112-4 Miss Sayers gives:

'Brothers,' said I, 'that have come valiantly
Through hundred thousand jeoparities undergone
To reach the West . . .

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If they have "come valiantly through" then "undergone" is superfluous; "jeopardies" seem very distant and abstract.

'O brethers,' said I, 'who hae throu a hunder
Thousant dangers raxt the wast wi me . . .

I doubt if there is an English word that would fit here as well as "raxt," a short pithy verb combining ideas of struggling and achieving.

Li miei compagni fec’ io si aguti,
con queste orazioni picciola, al cammino,
che a pen poscia li avrei ritenuti; (121-3)

Note the tension again between the rhyming verbs—the holding back and the surging forward. Miss Sayers gives:

My little speech made every one so keen
To forge ahead, that even if I'd tried
I hardly think I could have held them in;

The rhyme requires "in" but surely "back" is more to the point? "So keen to forge ahead" seems more chatty than "si aguti" demands and it is certainly weaker than the Scots phrase:

Wi this short speak I make my companie
That yare and aiverin for it, that
Gin I'd sayed, I couldna hae held them back;

Both versions lose the force of the contrasting rhyming verbs; Mr. Scott at least gets the "back" into the right place.

The "folle volo" of l. 125 becomes respectively "witless flight" and "skeery flicht": "witless" suggests something aimless and negative but "skeery" has the more positive force of something wild and irresponsible. The mountain that appears out of the sea is "bruna per la distanza," "grey with distance," "blear wi hyneness": "blear" is much more dim and indistinct. The storm breaks; Dante calls it simply "turbo," Mr. Scott translates this directly as "storm," but Miss Sayers oddly produces "foul weather," a weak equivalent which suggests to me umbrellas and wet trouser turnups. Dante's l. 139 is finely balanced:

Tre volte il fè girar con tutte l'aqueue:

(rhyming with l. 137 . . . un turbo racque). Miss Sayers gets a stir into her line:

And three times round she went in a roaring smother
With all the waters;

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though "went" is colourless and "roaring smother" rather vague and
generalised. Mr. Scott’s line really swirls:

And gart her birl three times round wi’ the swaw;

I know of no words in current English with exactly the kind of force
expressed by "birl" and "swaw."

The last line of the canto needs care; there must be no anti-
climax.

infin che’l mar fu sopra noi richiuso.

Miss Sayers’ line

And over our heads the hollow seas closed up.

sounds effective so long as one does not enquire too closely in what
respect the seas were hollow and how this "hollow" thing "closed." Mr.
Scott’s line both sounds as it ought to and is free from ambiguity:

Until the ocean gurled abuin our heids.

In "gurled" we hear and see the waters. In Miss Sayers’ line the de-
scription is generalised and sounds as if the figure had been worked
out by Ulysses retrospectively, but in Mr. Scott’s we feel that Ulysses is
experiencing yet again what happened when his ship went down. In
"gurled" we see and hear with him.

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Some Problems Regarding A Series of Letters
Between Francis Hutcheson and Gilbert Burnet

The first reactions in print to the first edition of Francis Hutcheson’s An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue
(published at the end of February or the beginning of March, 1725)
seem to have been a letter from "Philopatris" in the London Journal of
March 27, 1725, and a series of letters exchanged by "Philaretus" and
"Philanthropus" between April and December, 1725, also in the London
Journal. The letters were collected and published as Letters Between
the Late Mr. Gilbert Burnet, and Mr. Hutchinson [sic], Concerning the
True Foundation of Virtue or Moral Goodness. Formerly published in

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