correspondents abroad

Going Out of My Dialect

RUTH MORSE

SIX YEARS AGO, WHEN I MOVED FROM CAMBRIDGE TO TEACH AT THE UNIVERSITE PARIS–7 (DENIS DIDEROT), ONE OF MY COLleagues insisted I join their convivial outings to the theater: Shakespeare in French would be *easier to understand*, because in a current idiom, less burdened with metaphor, and pruned for the theater, a play rather than a monument. For me, at least, it is not easy, and I have had to learn to listen binaurally, because the actors stimulate a simultaneous English text whose rhythms I didn't know I knew so well. But French Shakespeare is constantly, startlingly, illuminating; it has made me read and respect translations I ignored altogether or disdained as cribs; it has helped me understand as well as to answer questions; and to question what I have long taken for granted. Coming back from translation refreshes a text I did not know I knew so habitually. For a middle-aged scholar and teacher, speed has long been an issue, because thinking I know, or knowing what I think, reinforces a problem of concentration. I read too fast, I need to teach tomorrow morning, or I am looking for something for what I'm writing. I compare this performance to another. Familiarity may not breed contempt, but it certainly damages attention. French Shakespeare spurs alert awareness because it is such a curb to letting the text gallop withal; it is the source of constant startling insight into interpretation.

To continue anecdotally, my French isn't good enough for me to be able to have authoritative views about the new text in itself, and I cannot participate in some of the posttheater conversation. But I do have a certain familiarity with Middle and Early Modern English, with the whole Shakespeare canon, even (and this marks my age) the King James Bible. In the theater, one thinks about what the translation is *for*, and going to the theater in Paris has helped me think about the theater in anglophone countries, where verse speaking is one of many aspects that may have a very different history. And I should, no doubt, mention here that *theatrically*, the translations of which I am cognizant are all into prose. French directors often treat Shakespeare with a freedom that contrasts with what we are used to in English, so that I am also often less pleasantly startled by the production, which can give rise to thoughts about

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over- and undertranslation. My experience thus far suggests that French theater is still "talkier" than modern anglophone theater, but it is (musical comedy aside) more spectacular. Anglophone actors also spend more time in the gym.

Our linguistic moment invites us to think again about "translationese," not absorption, quite, but capacities for concurrency, for simultaneity, for an alienation effect ("this is a translation") that is also an invitation to collude in the pretense of knowing about English. Not only is some English readily available to more than just some people, the *idea* of the availability of English*es* is pervasive. Music and the movies, subtitles and supertitles, bilingual editions (such a key experience of modern language study), all encourage a new state of biglossia that is not like the long sway of Latin. Some of the great *idées reçues* of translation theory go back to 1540, to Etienne Dolet's five requirements: the translator must first understand the original text extremely well; he must have perfect command of both languages; although he must not translate word for word, he must preserve his author's word and idea order insofar as possible; he must find words already existing in the target language and adapt from the source language only when absolutely necessary; he must imitate the original style. From Seneca to Steiner we have worried about the target language's absorption and expansion. Despite everything I used to believe, I now think the ambition to re-create the source in the target language is laudable, but not always compelling; that sometimes a translation should sound like a translation.

This is not the place to travel any distance in either direction. I want, in what follows, to sketch three related aspects of what I have learned in returning from French Shakespeare: first, the way that translation resuscitates metaphor and thus uncovers presuppositions and unargued positions in the text; second, the ways this alertness may further illuminate implicit assumptions about social institutions; and third, how habits of ordering these things in France have exposed me to questions to which I am not habituated.

Here is Kent, in the Arden edition (2nd ser.), delivering Lear's message to the Cornwalls and insulting Oswald in the process:

> A tailor, sir: a stone-cutter or a painter could not have made him so ill, though they had been but two years o'th'trade. [. . .] Thou whoreson zed! thou unnecessary letter! My Lord, if you will give me leave, I will tread this unbolted villain into mortar, and daub the wall of a jakes with him. Spare my grey beard, you wagtail? (2.2.55–56, 61–64)

And here is Yves Bonnefoy solving that text's problem of vocabulary, difficulty of understanding, equivalence:

> Oui, monsieur, un tailleur. Car un sculpteur ou un peintre ne l'auraient pas aussi minablement fagoté, et même n'eussent-ils eu que deux années de pratique. [. . .] Ce zéro, fils de pute! Cette trentième lettre de l'alphabet! Monseigneur, si vous m'en donnez permission, je vais piler cette mauvaise graine dans un mortier, et en enduire les murs de quelque latrine. «Par respect pour ma barbe grise?» Pauvre serin! (273)

At the level of the passage as a whole, Bonnefoy is thinking nothing / superfluity, tailor / piecing together / crushing and painting with a weed / nothing / too much / bird (idiot), where no one seems to be quite sure why "wagtail" and he has chosen the group name for canary to yield the association "nincompoop." Slow-motion defamiliarization conveys meaning in addition to function (which scurrying native speakers are all too likely to gloss over, which is to say undergloss); the mix of animals and impostures, of dishonesty and disguise, reveal themselves at once if one is forced to look at what Kent says as well as what he means; in this scene, as always, forms of address are consistent and significant—although, in fact, Bonnefoy's Gloucester says "tu" to his Kent, whereas Shakespeare's "you"

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says something about Gloucester's own slow formality. Each interpretative choice modulates through a linguistic landscape and offers a partial view; it encourages weighing and comparing meanings rather than investing in one certainty.

There is linguistic luck: any French translation preserves the resources of the subjunctive, as it attends to the distinctions of the second-person pronouns, as it manipulates the formalities of a variety of past tenses that English does not have. So trivial are these points that no French reader would emphasize them: but what a benefit to the anglophone reader, or listener in the theater, who is suddenly aware of social distinctions, rhetoric, and hierarchy most emphatically *not* lost in translation. In *Twelfth Night* Feste's Latin *auctor* Quinapulus reveals *lui qui n'a pas lu* (1.5.32). The rhetoric of French good manners, so strikingly formal to the Anglophone, and so hard to learn, is comfortable with Shakespeare's societies and distinctions. Kent means "to go out of my dialect" (2.2.106), what Bonnefoy translates as "abandoner mon style habituel" (275)—it is my own habitual laziness that they challenge.

Let me offer a more institutional example. The sacral relations of marriage, kingship, and religion are at least easier to hear in French than in English; easiest of all is the vocabulary of accident and substance, immanence and transcendence, which is immediate in translation. Sometimes too much so:

> Contenez-vous, Madame, et pardonnez-moi. Voici les frères vivants de ceux que vous, les Goths, vous avez vus mourir; pour leurs frères égorgés ils demandent religieusement un sacrifice. Votre fils *est marqué pour cet holocauste*; et il faut qu'il meure, pour apaiser les ombres gémissantes de ceux qui ne sont plus.
>
> (Hugo 34; my emphasis)

Old and old-fashioned Titus Andronicus is marked by the way he speaks:

> Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.
> These are their brethren whom your Goths beheld
> Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain
> Religiously they ask a sacrifice;
> To this your son is marked, and die he must,
> T'appease their groaning shadows that are gone.
>
> (1.1.121–26)

"Patient" is what we must "be": it is an adjective or, less frequently, a noun. It is *nowhere else in Shakespeare* a reflexive verb. As for the lexical forms of "brethren," nine of Shakespeare's twenty uses come in *Titus*, and most of them are Titus's. After all that, the ironies that abound in "religiously" are almost an anticlimax. In the mid–nineteenth century, François-Victor Hugo overtranslated to make Titus more Roman. Hugo heard in Titus the Christianized language of sacrifice as gift, because Holocaust meant dying *for* something; translation illuminates more than a page of Shakespeare, by calling my notice to where arguments come from. In going out of my dialect, I have also moved from vaguely Protestant East Anglia to a legally secular but deeply Catholic environment.

Trivial, perhaps, in themselves, the sum of these examples is not. The different rates of linguistic change also invite me to think bilingually. "Conscious" / "consciousness" is a post-Shakespearean coinage. So are the words for cognition, "alert" and "aware," that I used in my opening paragraph. Shakespeare's "science" (four uses) is a body of knowledge: his art of knowing is not slender, but his vocabulary is narrower than one might guess. We may rush to Hamlet's inner voice (eight uses), but there are nine lexical "conscience"s in *Cymbeline*, ten in *Merchant* (mainly Launcelot Gobbo's), thirteen in *Richard III*, fourteen in *Henry V*, and three times as many uses in *Henry VIII* as in *Hamlet*. I believe that a detailed examination of this semantic field by someone multilingually aware of the period's religious debates might make a major contribution to the sectarian arguments over Shakespeare's exact beliefs.

Six years ago my colleague promised me a play, not a monument. While, with the advent of

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Shakespeare as big box office at the movies, his plays (or some of them, at least) are becoming less new than they once were, nevertheless French readers and spectators are unfamiliar with numerous stories, characters, or floating lines and phrases. Nor need they be influenced by recognizing who may be cast against type. French actors can appeal, as it were, over the head of the play, when they speak to an audience that has not already made up its mind about who's in and who's out. Shakespeare is not A Classic. French audiences can still be *surprised*.

We go to the theater with our students, who, after all, are not there for my reasons. They are there because in France, at the moment, Shakespeare belongs to the young. After the success of Baz Luhrmann's lovers, they went in huge numbers to Stuart Seide's theatrical production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and were astonished by how different it was from what *they* thought they knew.[1] Seide is originally from New York, but his translations are his own. As we all also learned a long time ago, translators work into their mother tongue, not out of it. This means that if Seide's decisions strike a French ear as eccentric, as *translationese*, he is vulnerable to accusations that he has made a mistake. I wonder. In his production, Mercutio, as the leader of the feuding young Montagues, evinced precisely the kind of macho chic that is now an everyday occurrence. Leading his mates offstage, he addressed them *in English*, "Shall we go?" in the kind of streetwise sophistication that now peppers the French of many different kinds of speakers. Seide, like many other contemporary translators, invites us to feel the equivalentness, the Englishness, of the text. Jean-Michel Déprats's recent *Henry V* turned the language-lesson scene inside out;[2] the pedants of François Regnault's recent *Peine d'amour perdu* taught English rather than Latin. They appeal to the idea that everyone (certainly every schoolchild) knows some English.

It is not only in the past that Shakespeare has been a stick with which to beat the whole range of classicisms; he offered alternatives to the ways they ordered things. Nor did or does Shakespeare come straight from Stratford. German Shakespeare was a threat as well as a model of critical understanding and institutional development; Italian Shakespeare filled the opera and captivated French composers; Shakespeare plots invigorated Boulevard theaters, while the Lambs were moralized for school Readers and Shakespeare characters were allegorized by grown-up writers. The great thing about a translation is that you don't have to treat it with respect; where Shakespeare is unfamiliar you can mistranslate and misunderstand and take what you want or need without blame.

Current theatrical translation practice, so far from smoothly transposing the play into the target language so that audiences can sit back and relax, now deliberately breaks old rules, and dispels old certainties. Translators emphasize the *translatedness* of their Shakespeare with a dynamic recognition that somebody has to speak what they write. They create something both permeable and provisional, and they invite an imaginative participation no less rigorous because it is more strenuous. Translators often find slangy and vulgar equivalents, to the surprise and delight of the audience raised on correctness. They free directors to adapt a text that is no monument. Good translations, now, offer *cohabitation*, with all the partners' restless tension; they give more than what is *not* lost in translation; they defamiliarize Shakespeare, and they read him new.

Notes

[1] Stuart Seide is director of the Théâtre du Nord (Le Centre Dramatique National Nord-Pas-de-Calais á Lille). See Morse for a review of his production of *Roméo et Juliette*.

[2] Jean-Michel Déprats is general editor of the new Pléiade Shakespeare (rev. in Morse, "I Will Tell Thee"). His *Henry V* was created for the Avignon Festival and then seen at the Théâtre de l'Aquarium at La Cartoucherie, Paris. See Morse, "Gone."

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