

## Translation: Arrivals and Departures

HUGH HAUGHTON

*For Clive Scott*

---

### 1

I want in this essay to offer some personal reflections about the experience of poetry in translation, dwelling on a handful of moments which have sharpened my sense of the place of translation and what I think of as the translation of place.

Appropriately, given the wish to commemorate Clive's Scott's work, they largely involve translation from and into French. Though these moments mainly revolve on poetry, I want to start with an extra-literary example which concerns place. One misty spring morning after visiting Malvern Abbey in the heart of English countryside, I headed for the local pub for a call of nature. There, in the immaculately white-washed outside toilet, I saw a single sentence neatly inscribed in capital letters: 'Moi, je déteste la nature'. It seemed a perfect instance of a site-specific text, and it instantly changed my apprehension of A.E. Housman country. It wasn't just the sentiment, but the different *language* of sentiment which arrested me, invading the sweet especial rural scene and revealing something about the English culture of nature and the 'call' of nature itself. The inscription suggested the presence of a traveller, or outsider, entering the place from elsewhere.

I think of the instances of poetic translation I want to talk about as in related territory. Each involves the experience of a translated poem as an event in its own

language (the target language) not the source language. Looking back, I see they also involve a sense of textual travel, a poem travelling from one place (and tongue) to another. In fact there is a sense in which translation is itself a form of travel literature, involving a circuit between home ('wherever that may be', as Elizabeth Bishop put it in 'Questions of Travel') and abroad (wherever *that* may be). These days many (or most) of us are as abroad at home as we are at home abroad, and most of the world is bi-lingual or multi-lingual. Nevertheless, perhaps because I am neither a linguist nor widely-travelled, I think of changing languages as involving a tug between different places as well as tongues.

I speak only as an outsider or occasional trespasser in the field of translation studies. Nevertheless, like most readers I am continually running up against what Wittgenstein calls 'the limits of my language' as I encounter texts travelling to and from other languages. As a relatively monoglot person, with a smattering of a few European languages and an interest in poetry, I rely heavily on translations when I read poets from other languages. However, there is also a sense in which poetry, like the past in L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, is a foreign country. Writing of it, Randall Jarrell said 'When you begin to read a poem you are entering a foreign country whose laws and language and life are a kind of translation of your own; but to accept it because its stews taste exactly like your mother's hash, or to reject it because the owl-headed goddess of wisdom in its temple is fatter than the Statue of Liberty, is an equal mark of that want of imagination, that inaccessibility to experience, of which each of who dies a natural death will die.'<sup>1</sup>

Nobody knows more about the poetics of translations between French and English than Clive Scott, whose *Translating Baudelaire* and *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* offer the most sustained and provocative account of the theoretical and technical issues at stake in the work of that crucial go-between, the translator of poetry. The author of *The Poetics of French Verse* (1998) has an unmatched knowledge of the inner workings of French poetry but his close readings of translations and experiments with translation reveal a comparably intimate knowledge of English poetry as well as of the multiple models of

---

<sup>1</sup> Randall Jarrell, 'The Obscurity of the Poet', *Poetry and the Age* (London: Faber, 1955), p. 23.

translation from one to the other. Sticking to the metaphor of translation as travel, we might think of these studies as Scott Expeditions. One of their great virtues is to move us beyond a misleading dependence on models of ‘accuracy’, ‘adequacy’, and ‘equivalence’, and to take us away from accounts of the inevitable ‘failure’ or ‘impossibility’ of translation. Scott’s book on Baudelaire ends with an intercut version of ‘Le Voyage’ which is an invitation to a different kind of intellectual voyage. In contrast to Captain Scott’s failed expedition to the Pole and accounts of translation itself as failure, Professor Scott’s travelogues are successful invitations to a new kind of voyage from tongue to tongue and poem to poem.

Literary translation is a specialized field, but questions of translation, like Elizabeth Bishop’s questions of travel, affect all readers of literature. None more so, of course, than readers of poetry, an inherently trans-national enterprise, as Jahan Ramazani argues in *A Transnational Poetics* (2009). In the course of a career mainly devoted to British, Irish and American poetry and nonsense literature, I have repeatedly come up against the border between languages and had to confront the importance of those border-crossings that are translations. This was particularly so in the case with the two poetry anthologies I edited, of nonsense and war respectively. Compiling *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry* (1988), a *sui generis* museum of international nonsense verse, I drew on existing translations where possible, but found myself forced to do my own versions of medieval French *fatrasies* as well as lyrics by Lorca and limericks by Seferis. Representing versions of Russian *Zaumnik* (or ‘trans-sense’) poetry, Dadaist texts, the *Galgenlieder* of Christian Morgenstern and German *Unsinnspoesie* raised radical questions about the relationship between Babel and babble, and attempts to transport the specificity of sometimes tongue-twisting linguistic play from one tongue to another. Jean-Jacques Lercercle reminds us that French does not have an adjectival equivalent of ‘nonsensical’ (since *insensé* means something more like ‘out of his senses’). Nevertheless Louis Aragon translated *La chasse au Snark*, and I briefly considered translating this back into English, since it had travelled a long way from Carroll’s Oxford into Surrealist territory and I wondered what it would look like on its return home. I still haven’t found out, but, encountering great French

translations of *Alice's Adventures* and German translations of Lear's limericks, I found nonsense to be as robustly trans-national as trans-sensical.

The *sui generis* phonological and semantic high jinks of the Russian poet Khlebnikov or the Dadaist Tristan Tzara work on the border of the meaning of their own languages, but the material form of the borders and the specificity of the nonsensical sounds are profoundly different in English. In ancient Greece Aristophanes invented ornithological idiolects in *The Birds*, while in 17<sup>th</sup> century England John Taylor the Water Poet purported to translate 'Sir Gregory Nonsense, His News from Nowhere' from Utopian, and in Victorian England Carroll presented 'The Jabberwocky' as a fragment of 'Anglo-Saxon Poetry'. Similarly in Soviet Russia Khlebnikov in his futuristic ballet *Zambesi* concocted an onomatopoeic futuristic dialect for his *Zaumnik* birds. These examples suggest nonsense is in some sense about the translatability and untranslatability of any given language, which means that for the translator nonsense poems pose particularly challenging obstacles and invitations. If this involves losses, they are less important than the marginal Anglophone fun and games they triggered. Clive Scott's phenomenological approach to translation offers a useful guide to these inter-lingual labyrinths of nonsense, though I was not aware of it at the time.

When it came to compiling another international anthology, *Poems of World War II* for Faber some time later, I was faced with different problems of translation. Again, while mainly choosing between different current versions of foreign texts, I was compelled to include a couple of translations of my own (of poems by Desnos and Ponge). In other instances, faced with a range of texts by a foreign poet such as Celan or Rozewicz, I opted for those which 'worked' best in English for the purposes of the anthology. Looking back now, having read Clive's Scott's apologies for the poetic license of translators, I don't know whether I could have taken my bearings in the same way from his brilliant readings of Baudelaire or Apollinaire. Are conditions the same for the poetry of war and peace, I wonder? Would Scott's recipes suggest the right way to approach the rinsed minimalism of the Polish post-war poet Tadeusz Różewicz, the baroque austerity of Anna Akhmatova, or the painfully fractured, exquisitely distilled lyrics of Paul Celan? Celan was himself a great translator as well as poetic inventor, and in some sense

all his work operates between languages in many senses. I have learned a lot about poems in English and French through his two volumes of German translations, which include nimble versions of Emily Dickinson and Andrew Marvell which cast an uncanny foreign light back on their English originals, as do his versions of René Char and Paul Valéry on the French<sup>2</sup>. In the case of Celan's great 'Todesfuge', which I included in my anthology, I drew on John Felstiner's translation of the Holocaust fugue rather than Michael Hamburger's, partly because its use of German words within the English text makes us aware of the interplay between the two languages, and of the peculiar agency of German in the original (though the poem first appeared in Romanian). Felstiner's translation begins in English, gradually incorporates repeated German phrases from Celan's fugato text into the translated text and ends in uninterrupted German:

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland  
we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink  
this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue  
he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true  
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete  
he looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air  
he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod is ein Meister aus  
Deutschland  
dein goldenes Haar Margarete  
dein aschenes Haar Shulamith

Though of course the German phrases do not sound or mean the same in the English as in they do in Celan's original text, they make us hear the gap between languages as well as hear one language across another or behind it or beside it, implicit in it and yet entirely other. The effect is disturbingly uncanny in many senses.

Translation was at stake in a different way in the edition of Freud's *The Uncanny* for which I provided an Introduction for the New Penguin Freud under the editorial direction of Adam Phillips. The project scandalously broke with the

---

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Celan *Gesammelte Werke, Übertragungen I and II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000).

Authorised Version of Freud represented by the Standard Edition which had been established in the middle twentieth-century under the direction of James Strachey. For the New Penguin edition Phillips invited different English literary translators – not specialists in psychoanalysis or theory - to approach the German text from their own angle, insisting that there would be no agreement about the translation of key terms or agreed equivalences between English and German terms. This offered a complete contrast to both the monolithic earlier Standard Edition and the *Œuvres complètes de Sigmund Freud* under the direction of Jean Laplanche, which began by establishing the correct or agreed translation for every key German word and laid down normative equivalents for all important terms. I remember a conference in Oxford in which some of the French translators were clearly aghast at the scandalously unsystematic and *laissez-faire* stance adopted by Phillips's edition.

The translator of the *Uncanny* volume was David McClintock who had been responsible for brilliant translations of Thomas Bernhard novels like *Wittgenstein's Nephew* (1982). By and large, however, he stuck to familiar equivalences for his versions of 'Family Romances', 'Screen Memories' and 'The Uncanny' itself, unlike the translator of *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, who opted to retain the German terms *Ich* and *Es* rather than 'Ego' and 'Id'. Nonetheless, McClintock contributed a useful note on the tactics of translation he adopted, foregrounding the choices involved. As it happens, Freud's essay on the Uncanny is in many ways about translation. Citing dictionary definitions by Schiller and others, Freud discusses the 'Uncanny' (or *Unheimlich*) as an estranged version of the familiar (the *Heimlich* or 'homely'). Freud's essay begins with a comparative study of dictionaries, looking for equivalences across European languages for the German term *unheimlich* and finding none, and it is one of the great and fruitful effects of Freud's brilliant analysis that it demonstrates that *unheimlich* as a word (if not as an aesthetic experience) is not strictly translatable. The opposition of the *Unheimlich* and the *Heimlich* cannot be satisfactorily mapped on that between the 'uncanny' and the 'canny' in English (deriving as they do from Scottish dialect). Nevertheless English translations of Freud's essay have not only disseminated his psychoanalytic understanding of this aesthetic by-pass, as he calls it, but circulated the German

terms as doubles or mirrors of the English ones, with the effect that the *Unheimlich*, like Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* ('Alienation' effect) and Shlovsky's *Ostranie* (or 'Making Strange'), has become a familiar foreigner in English. All three terms for making the familiar strange have become strangely familiar as foreign bodies in English, like *Beaujolais* or *savoir-faire*. French translators also found translating Freud's term problematic. In 1919 Marie Bonaparte translated Freud's *Das Unheimliche* as *L'Inquiétante Étrangeté*, while conceding that it is 'en réalité intraduisable en français.' This circulated the strange notion of 'disquieting strangeness' as a French twin for the German term, though, as François Stirn noted in his introduction to the 1987 edition of the French translation, Roger Dadoun opted for the mirror term *l'inquiétante familiarité*, François Roustang for *l'étrange familier* and Stirn himself, while proposing *les démons familiers* retains *l'inquiétante familiarité* on the grounds that it is now the familiar French translation and because its 'beauté insolite' and 'impropriété' evoke the difficulty of all translation.<sup>3</sup>

When I went on to co-edit the first two volumes of *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, translation was less of an issue, though I faced some pragmatic questions about translation in relation to the poet's letters to and from foreign correspondents, including those written in French to Paul Valéry and Charles Maurras. Beyond these, editing Eliot's letters strangely triggered two translation projects of my own. The first involves Valéry Larbaud, the poet and translator who gave the famous lecture on Joyce's *Ulysses* on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1921 which was published in NRF in April 1922 and did much to put Joyce on the map in France. Eliot wrote to Larbaud on 16 May 1923, saying he had just read his *Œuvres complètes de A.O. Barnabooth* for the first time on the train coming back to London. He said he saw in it 'the parentage of what is now a very distinct frame of mind among our contemporaries.' In saying so, Eliot was presumably thinking of Joyce, Pound and himself, all of whom invested in modernist pastiche and imaginary personae along the lines of Larbaud's fictitious A.O. Barnabooth, whose *Poèmes par un riche amateur*

---

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *L'inquiétante étrangeté*, ed. by François Stirn (Hatier, 1987), [http://www.ac-grenoble.fr/PhiloSophie/file/freud\\_etrangete.pdf](http://www.ac-grenoble.fr/PhiloSophie/file/freud_etrangete.pdf)

first appeared in Paris in 1908, just prior to Eliot's year there. Barnabooth is a close contemporary of Eliot's Prufrock (a poem begun in Paris in 1909-10) as well a close predecessor of Burbank with a Baedeker and Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, two comparably culturally self-conscious and international literary personae, savouring the transition between tradition and modernity on their European travels.

Editing Eliot's letter, I dipped into *Œuvres complètes de A.O. Barnabooth*, and found myself carried away by their seductive and disconcerting poetry of travel. Soon afterwards I began translating the French poems as a way of moonlighting from my day job as editor of Eliot's letters. As well being pseudonymous poet of travel in many countries, Larbaud had translated Whitman, Coleridge and other anglophone authors, written numerous commentaries on texts from many languages, and was the author of *Sous l'invocation à Saint Jérôme*, an apotheosis of the translator addressed to the patron saint of translation. Larbaud seems a perfect embodiment of the analogy between travel and translation I am exploring here. After a year or so, I had put together a complete English version of the poems of Barnabooth, Larbaud's polyglot South American millionaire who had arrived in Europe via the USA. Though I soon discovered that the poems and journals had been translated before, notably by Ron Padgett and Bill Lavatsky in the USA, I was seduced by the poems about London, Stockholm, Elsinor, Berlin, and other places all over Europe and beyond, and amazed that Larbaud's ironic cosmopolitan alter ego had not been more widely recognized as a crucial precursor to such experimental modernists as Apollinaire, Pessoa and Eliot himself.

As a single instance of the pleasures of travelling with Barnabooth, I will give my translation of the opening 'Ode', a poem that, as it happens, Clive Scott offers versions of and commentary on, beginning with a 'bath of prose' and then launching on a typographically reconfigured, Apollinaire-like concrete version, based on multiple *decoupage* and the 'play of fonts, of bold, of roman and italic'.<sup>4</sup> My less adventurous version goes as follows:

---

<sup>4</sup> Clive Scott, *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) 140.



Lend me the great roar and seductive purr,  
The nocturnal *whoosh* through the European night  
Of a *train de luxe*, with its heart-breaking music  
Echoing down the gleaming corridors  
Where behind brass locks and lacquered doors  
The millionaires sleep tight.  
I'll go humming along your aisles  
Heading towards Vienna and Budapest,  
Blending my voice with the hundred thousand voices  
Of the Harmonica Zug.

It was in a carriage of the Northern Express between Wirballen and  
Pskow  
I had my first real taste of *douceur de vivre*.  
We were gliding across blank plains where shepherds  
Huddled in sheepskins under clumps of trees  
Stared back at us like figments from another world:  
(It was 8.00 o'clock, an autumn morning, and a beautiful singer  
With violet eyes was singing her heart out in the compartment next  
door).

Bland panes where Siberia and the Samnium Mountains flashed by,  
And flowerless Castille and the rain-washed gulf of Marmara...  
O Orient Express, South Brenner Rail,  
Lend me your drumming and insistent hum,  
Your vibrant voice along the line,  
The breathing of your monstrous engine,  
The heart-throb of the pumping pistons as the express  
Draws its four yellow coaches with embossed gold letters  
Effortlessly  
Through the mountain wildernesses of Serbia  
Into Bulgaria with all its roses...

It is those rhythms and those noises  
I want in my poems so that they speak  
My still unspoken life: that of a child  
Not wanting to know anything  
But still hoping for indescribable things.

The poem hinges on the pleasures of travel, mobility, tourism, a sense of Europe  
flashing by, as well as the needs for new kinds of rhythm which align modernity

with the fantasies of childhood. It plays on the gap between inside and outside, departure and arrival, while offering a luxurious but jaundiced sense of consumer freedom, moving between lives and places. In translating it I allowed a few phrases of French to inflect the English as in other poems Larbaud uses Spanish, and tried to keep the blend of anachronism and contemporaneity of the original ‘Ode.’. Though I wasn’t aware of Clive’s version at the time, translating it involves me in the same dialectic, wondering to what extent you domesticate, to what extent exoticize the poem’s ironic idiom and rhythmic mobility (‘those rhythms, those noises’), as well as its travelling view of time and place, as seen from the way we travel (and read) now.

Thinking about this I am reminded of a short poem by Emily Dickinson, perhaps the least travelled of all great poets, which bears on these concerns raised in the Larbaud:

A South Wind – has a pathos  
Of individual Voice –  
As one detects on Landings  
An Emigrant’s address –

A Hint of Ports – and Peoples –  
And much not understood –  
The fairer – for the farness –  
And for the foreignhood –<sup>5</sup>

Translated poems are also emigrants of a kind, arriving at the port or airport with a hint of other cultures. They raise comparable questions of fairness, farness and foreignhood, as well, of course, as questions about the ‘individual voice’ of both the original poet and their translator.

Eliot was an American poet whose voice was uniquely responsive to ‘foreignhood’. Working on him I was struck once again by the fact that this notoriously polyglot poet, who incorporated splinters of so many other languages into *The Waste Land*, rarely engaged in poetic translation himself. He wrote poetry

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by R.W. Franklyn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 383.

in French and attributed his discovery of himself as a poet to reading Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, but it was only in his still under-valued version of St. John Perse's *Anabase* that Eliot committed himself to poetic translation. Pound battled with 'The Seafarer', spent years generating new versions of Cavalcanti and other medieval Italians, and, building on Fenellosa, made translations from Chinese in 'Cathay' and the *Cantos* central to his *œuvre*. In contrast, Eliot, for all his investment in 'the mind of Europe' and allusive re-workings of ancient and modern texts, preferred to find his 'foreignhood' in English. Where we usually ask why did poet X or Y translate W or Z, in the case of Eliot we are left asking why Eliot did *not* translate Laforgue or Mallarmé, Gautier or Dante. Compared to Pound, Eliot's work is marked by an obstinate *refusal* to translate, a preference for citational *incorporation* rather than translation. 'O city, city' in *The Waste Land* may echo Baudelaire's vision of Paris, as the notes tell us, but that 'City' reminds us that 'cité' in French can refer to both the city and a quotation. It is the most minimal of citations from, and acknowledgements to, the great city poet of the nineteenth century, whose ghost haunts *The Waste Land*. At the close of 'The Burial of the Dead', Eliot's speaker addresses a presumably American acquaintance called Stetson in the streets of London, saying:

Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men  
Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
You! *hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!*

As the English 'You!' melds into the final invocation in Baudelaire's opening poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, so the reader is caught between languages as the streets of London are invaded by a familiar alien, a '*semblable*', 'brother' and 'other', rendering metropolitan London both foreign and hospitable to foreignhood. Though not the kind of text discussed in Clive Scott's *Translating Baudelaire*, we might think of Eliot's poem as representing both a refusal to translate Baudelaire and an inter-cut translation by other means.

Writing a study of the great Irish poet Derek Mahon engaged me in a study of a writer who, unlike Eliot, has always been deeply involved in translation projects. Mahon has not only created dramatic versions of Racine's *Phèdre*, Molière

comedies and Greek tragedies, but an arresting version of St John Perse's *Birds*, a complete set of Nerval's *Chimères* and a *Selected Poems* of Jaccottet. His recent *Echo's Grove* is an echoing gallery of translations, exhibiting a host of texts derived from other European languages as well as from Chinese and an imaginary Hindu poet. Once when talking about his attitude to translations, Mahon said he found himself thinking 'Hang on, that's a Mahon poem', and there is an eerie continuity between translations and original poetry in all his collections, including his two metropolitan sequences of the 90s, *The Hudson Letter*, reporting from New York but inter-cut with versions of Ovid and Laforgue, and from Celtic Tiger Dublin, prefaced with a version of Baudelaire's 'Paysage'. Working on Mahon, I found myself turning to what Clive calls STs (source-texts) and reading foreign poets as 'sources' (STs) for Mahon's poems as 'Target Texts' (TTs). In this sense, Baudelaire's 'Paysage' or Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre' or Nerval's *Les Chimères* are there as 'sources' and triggers for Mahon texts – just as a place might be, or a film, or painting, or any other kinds of inter-text. Though I have published a piece called 'The Importance of Elsewhere' on Mahon as a translator, escaping the restrictions of his Northern Irish background, I was mainly reading the originals for the light they shed on the Irish poet's poems, not the other way around<sup>6</sup>. In the process, even a poem such as Valéry's 'Le Cimetière marin' which I had encountered as a student in France with a 'shock of recognition', became a source for Mahon's uncanny version of it in *Harbour Lights*, 'The Sea-side Cemetery', which is one of the great modern verse translations from French.

In these cases, I would read the original French or Italian, German or Spanish, for the insight into the poet-translator's work, which becomes the real ST, while the original author's text becomes a kind a TT (both texts count, but the usual priorities are reversed). Reading in this direction, you take the 'original' as a point of departure for the prioritized translation, the poem that arrives. This is not historically unusual, of course. Most of us, reading Wyatt's 'Whose list to hunt, I know where is a hind' know there is a Petrarch source hidden in a thicket within or

---

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Haughton, "'The Importance of Elsewhere': Derek Mahon and Translation", in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, ed. by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002), pp. 145-83.

behind it, but we do not read it primarily as a version of Petrarch's *Rime* XCX so much as for its compelling life as an English poem in its own right, a report on dangerous liaisons in the Henrician court which provides one the earliest sightings of the sonnet sailing into the harbour of English verse. If we turn to the Petrarch nowadays, it will probably be because of the light he casts on Wyatt rather than the other way round. The same is true if we read Ben Jonson's imitations of Horace, Dryden's Lucretius, or Pound's 'Homage to Sextus Propertius.' Though all offer versions of classical poems, we read these less for insights into Latin lyric than as records of what anglophone poets have brought home from their travels in the other country that is the Latin past.

## 2

Countering the idea of the reader as reading in a 'featureless, evacuated environment' and 'with a uniform critical attention', Clive Scott raises the prospect of there being potentially 'no end to anecdotalism' but insists that reading is 'an essential part of our autobiography.'<sup>7</sup> Having offered a digested travel journal of some of my professional encounters with translation, I want therefore to reflect on two personal anecdotes which involve my autobiographical experiences of translation. They too turn on ideas of arrival and departure.

The first was at the Cambridge Poetry festival in the 1980s, where I heard Yves Bonnefoy reading with his English-language translator Anthony Rudolf. What struck home that day was not the trans-linguistic duet of poet and translator, but Bonnefoy's reading of his one of his own translations, his take on Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium'. Hearing it, I felt as if Yeats's poem had arrived safely in port, not in Byzantium of course, but in France and French. This struck me as uncanny in Freud's understanding of the term. Bonnefoy's Yeats gave me a sense of something foreign and new but also something intimately familiar; a text I had never encountered before but also something already known in what Yeats called 'the deep heart's core.' It wasn't the same poem, of course, but it bore traces of its origins. Listening to Bonnefoy's French, I suddenly found myself in tears. I don't

---

<sup>7</sup> *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) 56.

know why but it was if I had come by an unexpected foreign short-cut home to a familiar place. My reaction was a mixture of vertigo and home-sickness. Or it may have been that the Yeats poem, which I had known by heart since a teenager in Ireland, had become unknown again even as re-appeared in a new guise and new place. Perhaps all translations simultaneously travel in both directions.

Bonnefoy's title, 'Byzance, l'autre rive', alerts us to the strangeness of Yeats's own title, since, despite the retrospective announcement in the third stanza ('Therefore I have sailed the seas and come/ To the holy city of Byzantium'), the only sailing that goes on is in the title. With Baudelaire in mind, Bonnefoy might have opted for a title like 'L'embarquement pour Byzance', but 'l'autre rive', while playing down the fact of travel, picks up the idea that Byzantium is an imaginary other shore to Ireland. 'Rive' is one of Bonnefoy's key dream words, however, and in *Les Planches courbes* (2001) where he has a poem called 'La même rive'. His version of Yeats starts by saying 'No' in thunder, before spilling into a vision of energetic abundance:

Non, ce pays  
N'est pas pour le vieil homme. Garçons et filles  
À leur étreinte, et les oiseaux des arbres,  
Ces profusions de la mort, à leur chant,  
Les cataractes de saumons, les mers  
Gonflées de maquereaux, tout, ce qui nage,  
Vole, s'élançe, tout, dans l'été sans fin  
Célèbre concevoir, naître et mourir.  
Prise dans la musique des sens, toute vie néglige  
Les monuments de l'incoercible intellect.

If this looks like a version of 'Moi, je déteste la nature', in the less monumental Bonnefoy as in Yeats, it takes the form of a celebration of the music of the senses. I am not going to offer a Scott-like analysis of the work of transformation in Bonnefoy's unrhymed version, but the stanza, after its brusque, truncated opening line, bursts with active verbs as 'fish, flesh and fowl' are replaced by 'tout, ce qui nage,/ Vole, s'élançe', and the passive 'Whatever is begotten, born and dies' is displaced by the more open-ended infinitives 'concevoir, naître et mourir'. 'Dying

generations' become the even more mortally prolific 'profusions de la mort', while sentences spill across the boundaries, giving a less 'monumental' sense of the contrast between the original's 'sensual music' and the new 'musique des sens'. Most surprising, perhaps, is the transformation of Yeats's 'sense' when 'monuments of unageing intellect' becomes 'monuments de l'incoercible intellect', suggesting a very different kind of resistance to time in this poem about ageing.

Yeats's poem is also about travel ('Therefore I have sailed the seas and come/  
To the holy City of Byzantium') and about formal transformation related to the final journey ('Once out of nature, I shall never take/  
My bodily form from any natural thing/,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make,/  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling'). These transformation scenes are barer and plainer in the French as the speaker reports 'Et c'est pourquoi j'ai franchi les mers et suis venu/  
A la ville sainte, Byzance', saying 'Je ne prendrai ma forme corporelle/  
De rien de la nature', but 'à quelque/  
Semblance comme en font des orfèvres grecs'. In one way these sentences expose the sense of Yeats's poem, stripped of its familiar 'bodily form' in English, making it operate within a different singing-school and a differently named 'ville sainte', 'Byzance' rather than 'Byzantium'. When I first heard it in Cambridge, I felt the form of the unspoken English reborn on the rebound, as well as hearing its rebound in the new French poem, which had imaginatively 'franchi' the Channel rather than the Bosphorus.

Bonnefoy's *Quarante-cinq Poèmes de Yeats* begins with a lovely take on 'Down by the Salley Gardens', which, as everyone knows, begins 'Down by the salley gardens, my love and I did meet'. Bonnefoy's poem opens, 'Au bas des jardins de saules, je t'ai recontrée, mon amour', not only transforming it from a third person to a second person poem, but uncannily revealing a French origin for the lovely Irish dialect word for willow. The 'salley' that names the 'salley gardens' derives, like the French 'saules', from Latin *salix* but also comes by way of the Irish word for 'willow' *saileach*. Bonnefoy's translation finds the second person love poem lurking in the ballad, as well as a beautiful linguistic affinity among the willows of Sligo and France.

I experienced a comparable epiphany about translation some years later at the Poetry Society in Earl's Court Square. This was in 1986 at the launch of Derek

Mahon's prize-winning *Selected Poems of Philippe Jaccottet* (London: Penguin, 1986), a book revised later as *Words in the Air*. It was a combined reading by the Jaccottet and Mahon as his translator. I had seen the Mahon poems in draft, but what most struck me in Earl's Court Square were the words in the air, in French and English together, as well as the presence of the two poets, with their very different versions of poetry. On the one hand, the almost ferally shy but distinguished-looking Jaccottet, keeping his counsel in French in one corner, blinking uneasily in the metropolitan light of London. On the other, the heavier and smaller figure of Mahon, looking at home in London but drinking heavily and looking psychologically beleaguered. It was a moment when I could *hear* the difference made by the act of translation, with the two texts and voices engaged in a kind of *duet* in which one singer was responding contrapuntally with another singer in a different language, like the twinned voices at the end of Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione de Poppea*. In his introduction, Mahon quoted Jaccottet, another translator, saying he wanted to be 'attentive to a foreign voice, and to give to this voice, with the resources of our own language, an embodiment in which the original inflection survives'. The occasion became an embodiment of the uncanny travel of texts.

I have no time to discuss the poems, but many are about strangeness, and belonging to one's own place, and these have a bearing on Mahon's investment in translating Jaccottet. In 'Comme je suis un étranger dans notre vie', for example, we get the idea of the poet as a 'stranger in this life' (a phrase that in Mahon's *Hudson Letter* is associated with John Butler Yeats), set against an elusive, erotic vision of a 'toi' or 'you' which Jaccottet imagines might perhaps be 'ma patrie'. Mahon recasts this 'patrie' as a 'familiar land', rather than using such alternatives as 'native land', no doubt with his own relationship to Ireland in mind as much as any sense of Jaccottet and France. At the close of the French the speaker thinks of the addressee's real mouth and evokes an absent landscape:

je me souviens d'une bouche réelle...Ô fruits  
mûrs, source des chemins dorés, jardins de lierre,  
je ne parle qu'à toi, mon absente, ma terre...



In Mahon this becomes:

I think of your real mouth...O ripening fruits  
and ivied gardens, depths of golden lane,  
I speak only to you, my absent roots.

Like 'ma patrie', 'ma terre' is confidently possessive, implying a strong affiliation to a native place, however 'absent'. In contrast Mahon's Keatsian fruits and 'ivied gardens' play on the idea of de-racination, with 'absent roots' calling up Larkin's 'I remember, I remember' ('Is this where you have your "roots"?'). This subliminally maps Mahon's complicated relationship to Ireland and Northern Ireland. For 'ma terre', Mahon does not write 'my land' or 'my place' but 'my roots', plays on a complex web of feelings about de-racination and 'home' in his work, and the ambivalence about 'belonging' articulated in 'Going Home'. It also, of course, evokes the poem's 'absent roots' in Jaccottet's French. Speaking only to 'absent roots' is very different from speaking of 'mon absente, ma terre'.

Something comparable happens in Mahon's version of another early sonnet 'Je sais maintenant que je ne possède rien'. Mahon adopts a comparable sonnet form and an almost identical rhyme-scheme, following closely on the poetry of coming late sketched earlier in Jaccottet's French. From the outset the reader notices the shift from the 'heureuse patrie' Jaccottet imagines for the flying days that pass, to the more neutral 'happy place' Mahon invokes (the different weight of nationalism in Ireland - and patriotism in English - may have weighed here). The exquisite sestet goes on to translate Jaccottet's question about the finch's song, in a way that is particularly loaded in a translation:

Mais que peut dire  
quel est son sens?

Mahon renders this as 'Who can translate/ its meaning?' rather than 'Who can tell what is its meaning', recasting the poet's relationship to the bird's song in terms of his anglophone relationship to his French original. It is the question asked by every translator, faced with a foreign lyric, but in foregrounding the act of translation Mahon makes us acutely aware of the issues at stake.

These questions of home and abroad, the familiar and the foreign, are integral to the experience of translation, and Clive and others have explored these questions of ‘domestication’ and ‘foreignization’ of texts as they move from one language to another. I take this to be a variant of the always potentially *unheimlich* dimension of translation at work.

I was struck by something comparable when I first read Yves Bonnefoy’s poem ‘La Maison natale’ in France a couple of years ago on holiday in Southern France. This is a longish autobiographical sequence from *Les planches courbes*, which turns upon Bonnefoy’s childhood home (in the Lot) – which I had visited earlier - as well as his later holiday house at Valsaintes. It is a work that is uncanny in many senses, involving a return to the site of his childhood, now a watery ruin of some kind and inter-twined with dream-memories of his parents and allusions to the myth of Ceres. In Section IX, he records an extraordinary epiphany, which I will quote:

Et alors un jour vint  
Où j’entendis ce vers extraordinaire de Keats,  
L’évocation de Ruth “when sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn”.

Bonnefoy says he didn’t need to struggle with the meaning of the extraordinary lines of Keats, since they had been in him since childhood (‘depuis l’enfance’). He only need to ‘reconnaître’ (or ‘recognize’) it when it returned ‘du fond de ma vie’. Keats’s words, that is, opened up something about his own exilic sense of childhood, his mother’s elsewhere-ness, and his own sense of being ‘sick for home’ while at home and subsequent nostalgia about this.

It is a lovely commentary on reading, and it provides a fascinating insight into Bonnefoy’s earlier book of translation of Keats’s odes. Reading Keats’s lines in English in the French poem had a comparable effect on me as when I heard Bonnefoy’s Yeats in French – not tears this time, but a shock of recognition at finding the familiar text reborn within a foreign one. And, of course, it is itself a text about foreignness, about exile, and ‘being sick for home’.

Bizarrely perhaps, this un-translated moment triggered my translating the entire poem, 'La Maison natale'. I was feeling particularly home-sick at the time in the wake of the death of my parents, and, subliminally, I think I was not only encountering Keats in a French poem here but finding myself caught up in an uncanny version of my feelings about my lost home and the sale of the last physical link to my childhood place. I drafted a version of the text immediately after reading it, and have been working on it ever since. Paradoxically, the most untranslatable moment in it is Bonnefoy's quotation from Keats. Reproducing it in English does little justice to its foreignness in the French. In my version I considered using Bonnefoy's own translation of Keats, or even a tag from Victor Hugo's 'Booz endormi', with its comparable French invocation of Ruth as inter-text, but in the end I opted for Keats's own words.

Bonnefoy's poem represented a comparable familiar otherness to me, or combination of otherness and familiarity. In translating it, I knew I was caught up in a sub-terranean kind of mirroring, and that in reading and translating his poem about his childhood home, I was also tuning into my feelings about losing mine. I did not set out to reflect this in the translation, as I could have done by a few details which might have aligned the text to the physical or linguistic lost domain of my own childhood in Co Cork, but it probably drives the whole piece. Translating Bonnefoy's earlier poem, 'Le mot *ronce*, dit-tu?', where the poet says 'Je me souviens/ De ces barques échouées dans le varech/ Que traînent les enfants les matins d'été', I translated Bonnefoy's 'barque' not by 'boat' but by the Irish word 'curragh', which brought it into the field-force of the West of Ireland of my childhood. I thought anything like this here, however, would skew the oneiric neutrality of 'La maison natale', with its effect of being between languages, time zones and places; home and elsewhere.

All this leads back to the question of arrivals and departures. You see 'Arrivals' and 'Departures' written up in airports and railway stations; translations are like that. Clive Scott has written that 'Translation, as part of its mission to disseminate the ST [source text], must travel *away* from the ST, but *in the company of the ST*, adding that 'the ST's sources must also become part of this travelling away, like the

works for which the ST might, in its turn, be a source.<sup>8</sup> In trying to translate Bonnefoy, or reading Bonnefoy's translations of Yeats, I do not think I experience it quite like that. Travelling away is also travelling toward, and travelling toward travelling away. Perhaps this is true of all writing. As with the Liszt setting (or Schubert's) of Goethe's 'Über allen Gipfeln/ Ist Ruh', however, there are times when you need to hear a single interpretation of a text, however potentially polyvalent. Clive's brilliant versions are sometimes less like translations than jazz improvisations on standard songs, or Tudor, Baroque, or Classical 'variations' on texts from French. At a concert, however, I generally want my Schubert *lieder* singer, or the pianist playing a Liszt transcription, to offer a single interpretation of the piece – though, of course, only one of a number of different interpretations – rather than being faced with multiple possible ways it could be performed in one sitting.

I would like to end by quoting the opening section of my translation-in-progress of Bonnefoy's poem of return, 'La maison natale':

*The House where I was born*

1

I woke. It was the house where I was born:  
foam was battering the rocks.  
No birds. Just wind opening and closing the waves,  
the smell of the horizon bearing down,  
and ash, as if the hills concealed a fire  
devouring a universe somewhere else.  
I walked to the veranda where the table was laid  
and water shook the table-legs and side-board.  
It was clear she was coming,  
the faceless figure rattling at the door  
in the dark stairwell, though the water  
was now too deep in the room.  
I turned the door-knob, which resisted,  
then caught faint murmurs from the other shore:  
laughter of children playing in the long grass,  
the games of others, always others, having fun.

2

---

<sup>8</sup> Clive Scott, *Translating Bandelaire* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000) 220.

I woke. It was the house where I was born.  
It was raining softly in all the rooms.  
I wandered from one to another, watching  
water shivering in the numerous mirrors  
piled around. Some were already shattered,  
others wedged between the furniture and wall.  
It was from their reflections that a face  
materialized from time to time, laughing  
with a sweetness not quite of this world.  
When I tentatively tried to reach inside  
and touch the goddess's long dishevelled curls,  
I saw beneath the shivering water-veils  
the forehead of a dissociated little girl...  
astonishment between being and not being...  
a hand hesitating to touch the rising mist ...  
and then the sound of laughter receding  
down echoing corridors in the deserted house.  
*This is the stuff that dreams are made on;*  
an outstretched hand unable to resist  
the rushing water memories dissolve in.

Once again, we encounter Bonnefoy's 'l'autre rive' (my 'other shore'). Though Bonnefoy has translated many Shakespeare plays, including *The Tempest*, the Shakespearian inter-text in my translation ('the stuff that dreams are made on') is a response to Bonnefoy's 'Ici rien qu'à jamais le bien du rêve'. It suggests that translation itself is some such stuff. If this is close to what Clive Scott calls 'over-writing', I don't want it to over-lay the sense of the poetic uncanny which inspired me to translate it in the first place. The aim is to retrieve it. Quotations themselves are always potentially uncanny. *À la recherche du sens perdu* entails going *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Beyond that, however, both the original and the translation are attempts to grapple with the primal experience of being in and out of place in the first place – in our first language - as Bonnefoy discovered on first encountering Keats's ode. I suspect something like this lies at the heart of much post-Romantic poetry. As Eliot said, 'the end of all our exploring,/ Will be to arrive where we first started/ And know the place for the first time.'