

THAT SPANIARD IN THE WORKS: EDITORIAL NOTES

Murray Edmond

‘Jesus El Pifco was a foreigner and he knew it.’

John Lennon, ‘A Spaniard in the Works’

I remembered John Lennon’s 1965 book *A Spaniard in the Works* when *Ka Mate Ka Ora* Assistant Editor Lisa Samuels pointed out that the title of Jacob Edmond and Cilla McQueen’s ‘A Spanner in the Wrong Works’ would not be immediately comprehensible to readers with North American English, for whom the word ‘spanner’ is not common currency – it would need translation. That point threw a monkey wrench into Edmond and McQueen’s plans for their article’s title, but they decided to stick with the idiom, which had after all served the reasonably widely distributed work of the late Beatle.

To know itself to be a foreigner is the experience of any language when it is translated; to feel itself become a foreigner is likely the experience of any language when it is used to represent another. Each is changed in terms of the other. But the meeting place of the two languages – the process of translation – is a no-person’s-land rich in experience and vision. ‘To have a vision,’ said the New Zealand poet Alan Brunton, ‘you must leave home’ (Rodwell/Brunton).

Translation is an endless chain of causes and causalities (and also casualties, not to mention casuistries). In this issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora*, Jacob Edmond quotes the Russian poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko: ‘When the translation seems finished, it means one thing: translate again and again.’ When, in Shakespeare’s unlikely Athens, Peter Quince sees that Nick Bottom has been suddenly transformed and now has the head of an ass, where once he had Nick Bottom’s head, he cries out: ‘Bless thee, Bottom! Bless thee! Thou art translated!’ And we, as canny readers or insightful audience, might cry out in chorus, ‘Bless thee, Apuleius, thou art translated,’ just as when Quince first announced ‘our play is *The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe*’ we might have murmured ‘Bless thee, Ovid, thou art translated.’ Certainly Shakespeare would have read Ovid (and probably Apuleius) at school in Latin; possibly as a grown-up working dramatist he read English translations, Golding’s of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1567) and Arlinton’s of Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* (1566, under the title *The Golden Ass*). There have been many translations since of these

works, and Shakespeare's own works have since been translated in many ways, into numerous other languages, and into other dramas and other theatrical stagings and theatre traditions.

What might it mean to 'translate' or 'to be translated'? This issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora* has translation as its focus: its eleven widely different examples of translation practice provide a concentrated sampling of the process of translating. Each of these pieces includes new translations and also commentaries on how those translations have been achieved. In 'The Tibullus Conversation', Tom Bishop and Steve Willett argue the merits and demerits of their respective versions of Tibullus, recalling Lawrence Venuti's terms about how immigrant language might be received in its new home ('domesticated') or the impact that the 'emigrant' language might have upon its new home ('foreignizing' the host language) (Venuti, 14 and 15): 'Translation is not an untroubled communication of a foreign text, but an interpretation that is always limited by its address to specific audiences and by the cultural or institutional situations where the translated text is intended to circulate and function' (Venuti, 14). Again, we must translate again and again.

Almost nothing is unproblematic for the translator, starting with the idea of languages themselves. Max Weinreich, a Yiddish scholar defending Yiddish as a 'language,' disseminated the phrase 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy,' which he had heard from an audience member at one of his lectures. Languages exist in many different states, of coming and going, of being born and declining, of lingering after death or of taking up new life and new residence. The Homeric Greek inscribed on tiny pieces of gold leaf that Ted Jenner has translated ('The Gold Leaf from Petelia') would have sounded old and strange ('archaically poetic' as Jenner puts it) to those Greek souls who used it to take the right turnings on their way to Elysium. It is still possible to translate from languages that have no present living form (Jack Ross's translation of Marie de France's twelfth century medieval French is another example of such translation in this issue), but translation in that dimension proposes a full range of contextual 'interpretations' – temporal, cultural, historical – as well as the usual linguistic conundrums.

One might be tempted to propose that translation from one living contemporary language to another living contemporary language presents fewer temporal, cultural and historical obstacles. Examples of this practice in this issue include Fredrika Van Elburg's translations from Lucebert's Dutch, Laurie Duggan's from several Italian poets, Joanna Forsberg's and mine from Adam Wiedemann's Polish, and Cilla McQueen and Jacob Edmond's from Dmitry Golyenko's Russian. But there is never 'untroubled communication.' Jacob Edmond draws attention to the way in which Russian Modernism incorporated a style of recital alien to English language poetries' practice. Perhaps this happened because memorisation in a harshly censorious totalitarian regime is a way of transmitting the unprintable. In a reversal of English language Modernism, rhyming forms in Russian Modernism retained a mark of

opposition to establishment practice. Mayakovsky's work had shattered traditional forms, but then, after his suicide, he was recuperated and enshrined by the regime: the rebel suddenly represented the repressive. Thus Mayakovsky's Modernist practice became a kind of collusion. Such twists and turns are difficult to mark in translations of individual poems. Now, the contemporary, Post-Modern, post-Yeltsin Golyenko twists again and abjures the high oratorical style.

And how many translators does it take to turn one language into more than one? Samuel Beckett sought assistance from Patrick Bowles to translate his own first novel in French (*Molloy*) into his own first language, English. But with *Waiting for Godot* and with other works, he preferred the simple control of translating himself into himself. In this issue Pam Brown combines with Jane Zemiro to translate her own poem into French. Adam Wiedemann, working at the time with a limited English, undertook to translate Vivienne Plumb's poem 'The Vegan Bar and Gaming Lounge' into Polish, and in the process produced a poem that both translates Plumb's poem and writes about the process of translating. Joanna Forsberg and I have translated Wiedemann's poem to English, making use of Plumb's poem as a language source. This is not the only translation chain addressed in this issue of *Ka Mate Ka Ora*: beneath the surface of Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,' Martin Brooks discovers Neruda's poem to his mentor, the Chilean poet Alberto Rojas Giménez, and inside that a Navajo chant. He asks what kind of poetics spell Bishop was casting by invoking this concatenation of translation, and demonstrates that acts of translation can also be statements of poetics.

Finally, something of a literal and something of a symbolic connection obtains between translation and exile. In her essay about the Chinese poets Yang Lian and Gu Cheng, Hilary Chung deals directly with their exilic experiences living in Auckland under the phrase 'ghosts in the city,' as well as providing translations of two significant poems from their time in New Zealand. In relation to the poetry of the Scottish/American poet Helen Adam, Jan Pilditch's essay 'Two Women Poets' demonstrates how trans-Atlantic translation gifted Adam – though sadly only for a limited time – a special niche amongst the mainly male Beat poets and poets of the San Francisco Revival. The exile of the German-Jewish poet Karl Wolfskehl brings a major European poet, nearly 70 years old, to New Zealand, where he spent the last decade of his life. Wolfskehl's poem 'Albatros/Albatross,' which Andrew Wood has translated, borrows Baudelaire's ('Bodläre') image of the poet as an albatross, and comments that 'Storm and delusion/Are as familiar to me as to you ('Sturm und Wahn/Sind mir vertraut wie euch'). To be translated across the world at the age of 70 and continue writing within that enormous loss of context must surely have been an experience of 'storm and delusion.' Changing home and changing language are both kinds of 'translatio', a crossing over.

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References:

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Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge, 1995.