

**Kevin Windle**

**The Unethical Illusionist: reflections of a jobbing translator**

**(Jill Blewett Memorial Lecture 18 Nov. 2017)**

I should say at the outset, lest anyone suppose I am casting aspersions on any of my colleagues, that the ‘unethical illusionist’ of my title refers only to me. I will try to make clear my choice of terms later on.

I might begin by quoting John Rutherford, the translator of Spanish, who prefaced one of his translations by saying that translation is a strange business, best avoided by sensible people. I have to agree, and I’m one who has utterly failed to avoid it, and failed – what’s more – for a good many years now. I’ve been involved in translation in one way or another, since qualifying in my field, which originally was Russian (the language, literature and history) but broadened with time into the larger Slavonic field. When asked what I do, I sometimes describe myself as a small-time Slavist and jobbing translator.

Rutherford was referring to the translation of literature; some of what I have to say will also be about the translation of literary works in various genres, especially drama, and that of scholarly books, because that’s what I know best. Actually I have more experience of scholarly translation than that of literature in the accepted sense of the term. Unlike some of you here today, I have little experience of technical translation or the translation of legal or personal documents.

In the last fifteen to twenty years I have undertaken a number of commissions for academic publishers of specialised works in various fields: linguistics, classics, history, psychology, archaeology, with all their scholarly apparatus. I have also been responsible for translating, analysing, and editing numerous documents from the archive of the Communist International, and from Russian historical archives. There is, I regret to say, not a great deal of money to be made in this kind of translation, still less from the fiction, literary memoirs and plays which have come my way, but I’ve been lucky in that I haven’t had to live on it.

I did earn my living as a translator for some years in the 1980s, working for the BBC Monitoring Service in England, doing my modest bit in the Cold War. The word monitor has many meanings, of course, including an obsolete class of warship, and not forgetting monitor lizards, but we were journalists, translators and area specialists – in my case dealing with the Soviet Union and Poland. We gathered news for the BBC’s news services, selecting material of interest, according to established guidelines, recording radio and TV Programmes from the countries in question, and translating the output into English. The news services and government departments weren’t very interested in Russian or Polish literature, or research in the humanities. They wanted to know immediately about accidents (e.g. Chernobyl), disappearing airliners, the state of health of Party leaders (especially if they looked to be near death), protests and rebellions (e.g. Solidarity in Poland), and the proceedings at Party congresses. The training and practice of translation was excellent, often in less than ideal conditions (poor reception), and news flashes had to be done immediately – that’s the nature of a news service.

But since that time, and actually before joining the BBC, most of my translation work has been of a more literary or scholarly bent, for publication. One can of course debate the meaning of ‘literary’ and ‘literature’. Anthony Burgess once defined literature broadly: ‘the

aesthetic exploitation of language.’ By that definition, perhaps I’ve been doing quite a lot of literary translation without realising it (just as Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain was astonished to discover that he’d been speaking in prose).

My own output has been, one might say, rather eclectic: there has been, among other things, some fiction (Russian, Ukrainian, Polish), some stage and radio drama, some literary memoirs, a literary biography, some verse – not a great deal, a life of Caesar, and a history of the Celtic peoples. And I can’t omit to mention one book which is not in a conventional ‘literary’ genre, but happens to be by one of the great Russian writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sergei Aksakov: *Notes of a Provincial Wildfowler*. Besides being a novelist, Aksakov was a landowner who liked to spend his spare time shooting birds on his estate. In this book he left wonderful word-pictures of landscapes, nature and hunting in remotes places in the South Urals, with vivid descriptions of his quarry, i.e. many species of birds and some animals, as well as lyrical accounts of cooking and eating them. As a translation project, it might therefore fall outside the conventional limits of ‘literary’ translation, being in some senses technical – needing great precision and care in identifying species and describing them, but no less ‘literary’ than say Ivan Turgenev’s *Hunter’s Notebook* (similar title, related theme). My point here is really that the literary and the technical can overlap, perhaps more than one might suspect. The dividing lines are not necessarily clear-cut.

My earliest tentative forays into the business of translation were in fact in short fiction. As a graduate student at McGill University in Montreal, I translated some short stories by a contemporary Polish writer, Andrzej Brycht, which I thought worked well in English. It turned out that the author had recently left Poland and was living in Toronto, and looking for a translator, so we got together; I proceeded to translate other works of his, including a short novel which was published in Toronto, and a television script. Those translations led to other things and new projects: I found myself working on some wonderful plays by Ireneusz Iredyński and Jerzy Lutowski, which occupied my attention for quite some time. So I learned something of the complexity of translation for the stage, with Iredyński and Lutowski the unfortunate victims of my experiments. Of Iredyński, I never did manage to get the major plays published or staged, but did eventually have some success with his shorter one-act pieces: radio productions by BBC Radio Three and the ABC, and a volume published by Routledge in 2002 with my introductory article. Lutowski’s major play *Love Thy Saviour* was eventually staged in full in Toronto, and published, unfortunately long after the author’s death.

In fact, all these three writers died well before their time. I tell myself my translations were not a contributing factor, but have occasional visions of death certificates bearing the words ‘Cause of death: bad translation’.

So, since theatre has formed part of my *oeuvre* as a translator, I thought I might venture a few reflections on the business of translating plays. I will follow that by saying a little about the translation of verse, in which I have less experience, but enough to be aware of its special difficulties.

Assuming well-crafted, natural source-language dialogue, the aim must always be well-crafted natural dialogue in the target language. The same applies to fiction, of course (dialogue in novels and stories), but is that much more salient in drama. We’re dealing almost exclusively with direct speech (not reported speech; and not much narrative). If the translated dialogue sounds like thinly disguised Polish or Russian, that to me is a failure; if it is less intelligible than the original, that too is a failure. If lines which are transparently clear in the

original leave the audience of the translation puzzled (or indeed the actors), wondering exactly what is meant, something is wrong. If there is humour in the original, but none in the translation, that translation hasn't quite worked.

I will digress for a moment on matters related to clarity and transparency: I tend to be wary of literalism. It has its place, of course; many things can be rendered word-for-word, but too often literalism will produce utterly unacceptable results, and cannot of course be pursued as an end in itself, in prose, let alone drama or verse. It's no good calling it 'fidelity' if it produces unwanted obscurity or loses the point. A competent editor will be alert to undesirable literalisms – sometimes known as interference – but not always able to suggest an alternative, and these days we don't always have the luxury of a publisher's editor. So our lazy literalisms may not be expunged, and of course one comes across them in every kind of translation: I happened recently to be looking at a travel brochure about Italy, with Italian and English versions. It had a prominent heading '*Come arrivare*' and the corresponding English section was headed 'How to Arrive', which is grammatical enough but slightly puzzling, because nobody would say it; we'd say 'getting there' or perhaps 'how to get there'.

Times have changed; in language tuition, the grammar-translation method went out the window way back in the last century; we used to be taught to beware of literalism. As a student, I recall a translation class in which we toiled over a Russian passage – I no longer remember anything about it – only that I managed quite unthinkingly to produce the phrase 'Don't breathe!' The lecturer responded gently, 'Oh Mr Windle, you can do better than that!' Well, I didn't have to think too hard to take his point. Speakers of English do not usually say 'don't breathe'; they say 'hold your breath'. On another occasion, under the guidance of a different lecturer, we were translating something military, containing a generalised instruction, something like 'All soldiers seeking leave on such-and-such dates must report to the CO ...'. I was the one who produced 'soldiers', to be asked to think again, which I promptly did: the corresponding order in English could not say 'soldiers': the nature of the communication was in a particular register, which demanded 'all personnel'. And incidentally, this was not a class of 'Translation Studies', which didn't exist then. It was back in the Dark Ages. This was language pedagogy, but it was taken for granted that good translation meant translation into good English, that the act of translation should not obtrude, that the translation could read like an original – that was always the aim. I said times have changed: the opposite view has attracted some adherents in recent years (though it has its roots in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century), the view that the literary translator should not 'domesticate', that to do so constitutes 'ethnocentric violence', and that the translation should reflect and respect difference.

You will gather that I've never been able to fall in with that line of thinking, mainly because the reader, by and large, and I mean the attentive, educated reader, finds it difficult to accept the product and regards it as simply 'bad translation'. Ronald Hingley, translator of Chekhov's complete works, wrote of avoiding 'the limbo of translationese', something suspended between two languages, neither one nor the other. It is sometimes argued that literalism = fidelity, and therefore must be a Good Thing. The trouble is that the words 'fidelity' and 'faithful' are also used in quite other senses. As James Underhill has reminded us in a recent book on the translation of verse: the concept of fidelity is 'regularly quoted as an aim or an ideal', but translators may have 'very different ideas in mind'. Most of us like to think of ourselves as 'faithful', whatever our method. We don't readily admit to being unfaithful, but in any case, I'm not sure we're dealing in moral categories here.

I will refer at this point to a Czech translation specialist whose work I think particularly valuable: Jiří Levý, whose classic *Umění překladu* (1963) is now available in English, as *The Art of Translation*. He speaks of the translator as an ‘illusionist’. The ‘illusionist method’ in a way parallels performance on stage. The theatre seeks to evoke the illusion that what is happening on the stage is reality. There is a tacit agreement with the spectator, who knows it is not reality but accepts the illusion that it is. The translator creates an illusion that the translation is an original text. The reader, as a rule, knows that this is not so, but demands that the new version observes the same conventions as original writing and replicates the properties of the source text. Robert Dessaix, writing of the task of translating Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard*, also speaks of maintaining an illusion: the illusion of theatre *per se*, and the illusion that the translation is an original, in a sense suspending our disbelief on these twin counts.

In drama, almost by definition we are dealing with the spoken word, or words written to be spoken from the stage, rather than read on the page. They can of course be read on the page too, and actors have to learn their lines, but the ultimate purpose is to have them declaimed to an audience, not read silently by the solitary reader. This is a fundamentally different form of communication, a different medium: the audience is listening, not reading. Translation theorists may argue the toss over the virtues of the domesticating version v. the ‘foreignised’ one, but directors, actors and reviewers in the main know what they want: a speakable and playable text. The Austrian theorist Fabienne Hörmanseder uses the German terms *Sprechbarkeit* and *Spielbarkeit*, qualities not to be found in ‘the limbo of translationese’. Michael Frayn, the playwright and translator, judged by many the best English translator of Chekhov, says this: ‘every line must be as immediately comprehensible as it was in the original’; ‘each line should be what that particular character would have said at that particular moment if he had been a native English-speaker.’ (That, strictly speaking, may not be fully knowable; it will often rely on the translator’s imagination, but it remains a useful guideline.) This will usually mean moving some distance from a literal rendering. It means that idioms in the source text are not rendered word-for-word – obvious perhaps, but I have been surprised at some recent translations from Russian literature in which this happens with some regularity. It is impossible to tell whether it is a result of ignorance on the part of the translator, which must be suspected, or part of a misguided policy designed to get back to the ‘real’ Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, etc.

Idioms aside, inappropriate register, which is always likely to blight a translation, will stand out with horrible clarity in a stage translation: Arthur Schnitzler’s play *Sylvesternacht* (‘New Year’s Eve’) is set in comfortable German bourgeois society in about 1910, so is liberally laced with formulae like *gnädige Frau* (madam/my lady). An amateur English version repeatedly has ‘gracious woman’, and a character refers to his ‘mum and dad’, thus producing some unintentional humour, because we understand the meaning but can’t avoid noticing the clash of register.

Which brings me to intentional humour, often a source of great difficulty, and if the humour is entirely verbal, or dependent on word-play – insurmountable difficulty, and particularly salient in translating for the stage. No amount of conscientious literalism (or ‘fidelity’ to the word) will provide a solution, and you can’t very well have a footnote explaining the joke; drama doesn’t allow for footnotes; and a joke explained is a joke which has fallen flat. You can’t produce a successful comedy if every joke needs an explanation. But humour, as we know, is crucial to much drama and therefore the translation of drama.

The Polish translator, the late Stanisław Barańczak, who specialised in theatre, especially English theatre, said this: ‘For a translator there is no more humiliating experience than the moment when something that was meant to be funny produces an embarrassed silence, instead of laughter, from the audience.’ And what matters above all is the effect, so when all else fails the translator needs to be guided by the principle of compensation and substitute a target-language pun, or a different joke at some convenient nearby point, which may require much ingenuity and creative licence.

I will say just a little about the translation of poetry. I can’t pose as an expert, having done only a little – enough to develop the greatest respect for those who specialise in it. Two centuries ago Alexander Fraser Tytler laid down the law: verse must be translated into verse. This is a difficult one, because poetry takes different forms in different languages and at different historical periods, so again we run up against problems in defining our genre. Greek verse of the classical period was constructed on very different principles from those of modern English (or say, English prosody of the Romantic period). In Classical Greek verse, metre and scansion were vital; rhyme was not; it was considered glib, facile, not something that merited a place in elevated discourse. English verse of the nineteenth century by and large was defined by scansion *and* rhyme. Different languages have different phonological building blocks; different literary cultures differ in their poetic traditions and genres. Not all poetic cultures have limericks, or haiku or tanka. But there are poetic forms and genres which are shared by a wide variety of languages and cultures, and when this applies, it seems worth the effort of transposing not only semantic content but poetic form as well, as Tytler advised.

Tytler tended to be dogmatic about many things. He also said: ‘None but a poet can translate a poet.’ Playwrights sometimes say something very similar: only a playwright or theatre director can translate a play, and directors will work extensively on pre-existing translations to produce ‘new’ versions – viewing knowledge of the original language as somehow secondary. Well, ‘none but a poet ...’ may sound like common sense; nobody bothers to question it, but there are plenty of counter-examples: English translations of Alexander Pushkin by translators who are not otherwise known as poets, who didn’t think of themselves as poets, but have managed to produce absolutely masterly poetic versions, just as there have been many successful translations of plays by translators not known as playwrights. In the 1980s, Charles Johnston, a British diplomat, was responsible for a wonderful version of Pushkin’s long narrative poem (or novel in verse) *Eugene Onegin*, reproducing the stanza form and the rhyme scheme very successfully. Walter Arndt, an American not known as a poet, again produced some very creditable poetic versions of Pushkin. And on the other hand, in the 1960s a novelist and poet as skilled in many languages as Vladimir Nabokov (author of *Lolita*, *Invitation of a Small Boat*, *Invitation of a Small Boat* and *Pale Fire*) produced a famous version of *Onegin* in English, dubbed by Julian Barnes ‘an act of eccentric defiance’ and often described as unreadable. Nabokov dispensed with rhyme, metre and much else because he had concluded that a poetic version was impossible. However, while he scoffed at the efforts of other translators, I think the weight of evidence has proved him wrong. Johnston, Arndt and others have shown that it is not impossible, but it is of course enormously difficult. If the original poet has worked hard to express ideas in poetic form, the translator surely has an obligation to go beyond rendering unadorned ‘meaning’, beyond semantic content, and make the effort to replicate the formal features. To do otherwise looks like an abdication of translatorial responsibility. Reflecting on this problem in relation to a well-known translation from Persian, Anthony Burgess wrote, ‘the poet’s [i.e. poetic

translator's] job is to overcome such a difficulty', and enquired whether it was 'a problem of the limited resources of language or of the limited talent of the poet [translator]?' This same idea is stated in categorical terms, attributed to Borges, in Douglas Hofstadter's treatise on verse translation, *Le ton beau de Marot*: 'Try a little harder.' Essentially, Borges, Burgess and Hofstadter, like Tytler before them, are challenging us to make that time-consuming creative effort and try to reflect the original form in a kind of parallel poem. It can't be the same poem – no translation is 'the same'; there are only degrees of similarity – but the resulting poem should yield an approximation of comparable effect, which a linear version cannot.

To sum up, what are the general guiding principles I try to follow as a translator? I make no claim to originality here; they are time-honoured principles, best illustrated, I think, by their opposites: Here is Vladimir Nabokov, in the Foreword to his translation of Mikhail Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time* (1958): 'In the first place, we must dismiss once and for all the conventional notion that a translation 'should read smoothly' and 'should not sound like a translation'. He goes on:

The experienced hack [...] will tone down everything that might seem unfamiliar to the meek and imbecile reader visualized by his publisher. But the honest translator is faced with a different task.

Well, as a reader, I admit to being firmly of the meek and imbecile persuasion, and as a translator, in Nabokov's terms, obviously dishonest, unethical and thoroughly disreputable.

The same Nabokov wrote in 1964 in the foreword to his *Eugene Onegin*, of his 'ideal of literalism', to which 'I sacrificed everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar) that the dainty mimic prizes higher than truth'. That seems to me an admission that his unrhymed unmetrical *Onegin* is less than satisfactory on many counts, and that the 'ideal' equated with 'truth' has produced what Hofstadter has termed 'tedious and heavy-handed, strained and straining prose'.

So, at risk of being termed a 'dainty mimic' and an unethical falsifier, I admit to being an adherent of Levý's 'illusionist' school. That doesn't imply delusion or deception. There's a tacit understanding by the parties; the reader is usually told that a translation of a literary work is a translation, but the resulting text should not be designed to provide constant reminders of the fact. It should, quite simply, to my way of thinking, read as well as the original, while conveying as fully as possible the original content and manner. As we know, that is often easier said than done. But as John Rutherford said, translation is a strange business, best avoided by sensible people.

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