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Compte rendu

John Corbett. *Written in the Language of the Scottish Nation: A History of Literary Translation into Scots.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998. vii + 200 pp.

Once again, the study of translation proves to be a fascinating approach into contrastive or comparative cultural studies. In this book, John Corbett traces the way in which "Scotts" has been used as the medium, not so much for homegrown texts and topics, but for texts and literary concerns of wider provenance taken ("translated", in the Latin sense of the term) into the Scottish sphere. It means that many important Scottish authors are but marginally represented, or altogether ignored, simply because they stuck to topics of their own rather than taking them from abroad: there are only passing references, at best, to Walter Scott, James Hogg or Robert Burns. The advantage is, however, that Corbett's emphasis on translation into Scots lifts the status of this language *ab ovo* from parochial, provincial or folksy concerns and allows it to take its place, in this analysis, alongside English rather than in a subsidiary and subaltern position to it.

The taxonomical status of Scottish is a vexed, and therefore a very interesting one. The phylogenetic "family tree" view of languages would traditionally have seen an undifferentiated and unproblematic "English" language as the dominant standard of Insular West Germany. That language may, to be sure, have coalesced out of Southern and Midland variants, with major Norman-French influences, in the course of the later Middle Ages; but from the Early Modern period onwards, so the default model goes, there is a standardized "English", vehicle of literature, government and administration, with various dialects taking up a distinctly non-standard, oral, subaltern position both socially and taxonomically. In this view, Scots would be seen as a variant to be encountered in informal, spoken form and at best codified as a transcription of demotic speech. The dialogues of Walter Scott's *Waverly Novels* would give Scots speech, much as the pages of the Brontë sisters would render Yorkshire dialect, or Thomas Hardy would occasionally represent the speech of the West Country–spoken by lower-class, uneducated characters.

Another view is possible, however. It can be argued that, in the coalescence which

led, between 1300 and 1600, to the formation of a more-or-less standardized "King's English", the Scottish dialects were manifestly uninvolved. They were centered around a different capital, a different royal court, a different elite, and as such gravitated towards a separate codification and standardization–not only in oral, but also in written form. In other words: the late Middle Ages see the incipience of a process of separate crystallization patterns much as we see between Provençal and Tuscan, or Catalan and Castilian, or Dutch and German.

Thus we encounter, in the centuries between Robert the Bruce and James VI, when Scotland obtains a more-or-less effective central kingship, an attendant writing praxis which it would be plain wrong to consider merely as a local subordinate variant of English. Corbett call this, following the nomenclature of the great William Dunbar (c. 1460-c. 1530, foremost among the Scottish "makaris" or courtly poets), "Inglis". Not only is the variant in question regular and standardized in its inner features (e.g. the initial sound in relative and interrogative pronouns spelled as ⟨quh⟩ as opposed to English ⟨wh⟩; a past tense 3rd person sg ending in -it as opposed to English -ed)–it is also the vehicle of prestigious texts in the high style and for an elite readership. Among those texts Corbett lists chivalric romances such as *The Buik of Alexander, Lancelot of the Laik*, and Douglas's *Eneados*. Corbett classifies these texts as "translations", but that might be too modest a description–as if we should call Chaucer the "translator" of Boccaccio, or Malory the "translator" of Chrétien de Troyes. It does indicate, however, that in the cultural adoption of foreign material, Scots was a viable independent option alongside Southern English.

Thus a "systemic" or polysystemic view would accord far more importance to the status of Scots than a phylogenetic, philological model would. Even so, the situation remains complex and ambiguous, for the name used by Dunbar and adopted by Corbett for the Scots Germanic language was, after all, "Inglis", i.e., named after the Southern neighbour; and Dunbar himself referred to Chaucer as sharing "oure tong... oure Inglisch" (quoted p. 24). Thus the relations between Scots and English apparently did contain a flavour whereby the Southern variant enjoyed a more senior and determining name and position.

Later history offers a picture of "arrested development". The high point of written

Scots came and went with James VI. His succession, as James I, to the throne of Queen Elizabeth in 1603 (the "Union of the Crowns") meant that court life moved south to London. To be sure, a vestigial but important written praxis can be found in the seventeenth century in the works of Drummond of Hawthornden and Thomas Urquhart (who used a good deal of Scots in portions of his great Rabelais translation); but the trajectory is already one of decline, impelled further by the actual parliamentary union of 1707, when Scotland merged into an anglocentric United Kingdom of Great Britain. Although Corbett is at pains to find eighteenth- and nineteenth-century examples of Scots as a medium for intercultural communication, he is scraping the barrel–notwithstanding Alan Ramsay's occasional Scotticisms, Robert Burns's occasional references to countries other than his native sod, or Victorian bible-based religious texts. Nor does the case of Macpherson and Ossian have much to offer, since this instance of Gaelic-English contact seems to bypass Scots-English altogether; to some extent the most interesting inference from the case of Ossian seems to be that the cultural gap between Highland Galic and Lowland Scots would appear much wider and deeper that between the two anglophone neighbours, Scots and English. Scots English becomes the monopoly of characters in Walter Scott such as Meg Merrilies or Jeanie Deans: oral, demotic, mere *couleur locale.*

In retrospect, the decline of a more-or-less autonomous Scots literary praxis (and I repeat that the notion of "translation" serves as an excellent indicator for the degree of autonomy of such a linguistic/literary subsystem) would seem to controvert Corbett's grateful use of the phrase "the language of the Scottish nation". It is a phrase he adopts, again, from Dunbar; but the "nation" apparently afforded little staying power for that language after the departure of the courtly elite (after the Union of the Crowns) and the anglicization of the professional elite (after the parliamentary Union). The very terminology of *nation* is a standing invitation to anachronism, tempting us to project twentieth-century notions of cultural and political loyalty back into early-modern centuries with utterly different mentalities. Dunbar must have meant something quite different with the phrase "the Scottish nation" than contemporaries like, for instance, sympathizers of the Scottish National Party. Phraseological resemblances across the centuries are often merely a simulacrum of historical

continuity.

The question to which this book leads us as we follow its fascinating historical course is, then, this one: what continuity is there between the Inglis of Dunbar and the Lallans of Hugh MacDiarmid? The revival of a Scots variety of English in the twentieth century is highly remarkable. It took place in a modernist, leftist climate and for that reason alone stands out from dialect revivals elsewhere in Europe, which were usually nostalgic and reactionary; and it was, after a doubtful initial period, a highly successful revival, establishing Scots as a living and viable literary medium–more or less tandem with the process that sees Scotland take a new cultural and political position in a devolving British landscape. Certainly, the more contemporary examples that Corbett gives of translations into Scots are of the highest literary interest, indicating that the choice of non-standard, non-obvious, *salient* linguistic medium can prove to be as enabling and inspiring as it is challenging. (One is reminded of the French idea of the enabling constraint, the *contrainte*, which proved such a distinguishing feature of the Oulipo school and its offshoot Georges Perec; it is interesting, therefore, that Raymond Queneau features among the authors translated by Alexander Hutchinson). As Corbett puts it, the use of Scots affords translators "experimental licence... by the need to extend its register and vocabulary" (p. 4). Yet Corbett's presentation leaves the question open: to which extent is this resurgence of Lallans Scots a revival of the older, courtly tradition of Inglis–or else, to which extent is it a sign of a new attitude where demotic, spoken language (the speech of uneducated characters in the Scottish novels of Scott and Stevenson) claims a place in the sun? Is this the reawakening of Dunbar, or the emancipation of Meg Merrilies and Jeanie Deans?

Maybe that questions is not altogether a black-or-white one. The question whether the usage of Scots (or of Scotticisms) as a question of language switching or of register shift is ambiguous in many cases. Corbett himself is sometimes less than keen to sort out this ambiguity, and in many cases contents himself, when discussing certain texts, to list salient but superficial lexical markers such as the quh- spelling or the -it endings, leaving open whether their usage is a "foreignising" one, a superficially imposed accent, or a marker of inherent, unreconstructed Scottishness. From case to case, this may determine whether the

Scots thus deployed is the “language of a nation”, a mere rustic brogue , or a sociolect.

Whatever the case, the presence and new assertiveness of Scots English gives food for thought for all who are interested in the systemics of cultural diversity. Scotland, which present one of the best documented and most curious cases in the European record, can throw much light on cases like Catalan, Provençal, Ruthenian and Norwegian, and Corbett’s choice of Scots as a target language for “translations” offers an excellent approach for bringing these problematics into focus.

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