

Abstract

The scope of the research is indicated by the sub-title, “A Critical Study of Modern English Poetic Translations from Selected Greek, Latin, and Italian Poets”: the poets selected are Homer, Catullus, Horace, Ovid, and Dante, and the translations are by a range of modern English poet-translators. After an opening chapter that is mainly theoretical, the study offers detailed critical analyses of the original poems or extracts and also of the translations into modern English poetry, to investigate whether the modern English poetic translations confirm the validity of Middleton’s claim, “how centrally the art of translation has mattered in the history of English poetry” (Christopher Middleton in “The Presence of Translation: A View of English Poetry” in *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field*, edited by Rosanna Warren (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), p. 258). The analysis assesses the achievement of twentieth-century English poet-translators in their translations of the selected Greek, Latin, and Italian extracts or poems and demonstrates that poetic translations have become a peculiarly sensitive form of literary criticism as well as creative works of art in their own right. The research concludes by formulating some critical categories of and criteria for creative translation that will assist in the practice of poetic translation and in the critical examination of poetic translations.

Introduction

Through critical analysis of the original poems or extracts and also of the translations into Modern English poetry, the purpose of my study is to investigate whether the Modern English poetic translations to be studied confirm the continuing tradition of what Charles Tomlinson claims in his statement, “how centrally the art of translation has mattered in the history of English poetry” (1989: 258). I intend to assess the achievement of twentieth-century English poet-translators in their translations of the selected Greek, Latin, and Italian extracts or poems.

F. R. Jones writes about his reasons for concentrating on the poetic translation process: “I concentrate on poetry as probably the most complex genre of language in terms of both formal and semantic structure. . . . Another argument for looking at poetry is that, because of its inherent complexity, its translation is frequently judged as an artefact in its own right. . . . I do not believe that it is exaggerated to say that all translation is a form of creation; it is in poetry, however, that this claim is the most generally accepted.” (1989: 184.) I have chosen poetic translation as the focus of my study for similar reasons.

The sub-title, “A Critical Study of Modern English Poetic Translations from Selected Greek, Latin, and Italian Poets”, indicates the scope. The poets selected are Homer, Catullus, Horace, Ovid, and Dante, and the translations are by Modern English poet-translators.

The primary questions to be answered are: (1) How successfully have Modern English poet-translators translated the selected original Greek, Latin, and Italian poems or extracts into English poetry? (2) Have they recreated the originals in such a way that they have made an impression on Modern English readers of poetry through giving the original an afterlife and through the new life of the translation? (3) What are some of the guidelines and the principles for the process of creative poetic translations?

English poets often use the word “after” when they translate or adapt foreign poems into their own creative versions. The word has the meaning of belatedness, as well as in the

style of, or following the example of, the original. John Schad writes, "...the word 'after' can mean not only 'following in time' but also 'in pursuit of' or even 'in imitation of'" (2004: x). And, later in the same book, Jacques Derrida states, "...the word 'after' may move around a double meaning: 'after' as in coming after, or 'post'; and 'after' in the sense of 'according to' – *d'après* ... following without following" (2004: 9). All translations of poetry have these associations of the word "after", with reference to historical and cultural traditions that form an important part of translation theory and practice.

By combining the two words, "after" and "life", in the title "After . . . Life ", I intend, first, to remind the reader of the word "afterlife", which has been used to refer to translation, e.g. by Denis Donoghue, who states that Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, "emphasizes that a translation issues from an original, not so much from its life as from its afterlife; it marks a certain stage in the continued life of the original" (1989: 252). Jonathan Miller in his *Subsequent Performances* (1986) and his lecture *The Afterlife of Plays* (1992) has applied the word "afterlife" to dramatic performances: ". . . the afterlife of a play is a process of emergent evolution, during which meanings and emphases develop that might not have been apparent at the time of writing, even to the author" (1986: 35). Such thinking is relevant to creative poetic translation.

The second intention in using the title "After . . . Life" is to suggest that there is a certain amount of hesitancy about it, but that there is potential "life" in creative poetic translation, and to counter the somewhat negative comments that Stanley Burnshaw makes about English "verse translation . . . the poorest subdivision of English verse" (1964: xiv). It is part of the aim to offer an apologia for creative poetic translation. Just as Seamus Heaney's "The Redress of Poetry" (1995) attempted a redress of poetry, so I attempt a redress of poetic translation, but, at the same time, through a critical study of Modern English poetic translations, I acknowledge that some Modern English verse translations of the classical Greek, Latin, and Italian poetry have not been worthy of the original.

In referring to poetic translation as “creative”, the implication is that the translations are themselves works of art, not merely translations of the original but works of art that show the creativity of the poet-translator. The word “creative” often has a negative connotation, one of doing almost anything in the translation, sometimes almost dishonest: as Burnshaw says disparagingly about verse translations, “. . . translators felt free to do anything: they were ‘recreating originals’!” (1964: xi.) Writers on literary translation often lend support to this negative connotation: Douglas Robinson wrote: “. . . instead of pretending otherwise, instead of pretending that the translator constructs a stable one-to-one pattern of correspondence or equivalence between the SL [source-language] and the TL [target-language] text (which proves to be ultimately impossible), we should recognize and, contextually, encourage the translator’s poetic creativity” (1991: xv). Robinson’s (and others’) views about the impossibility of “synonymity”¹ (which I prefer to the words “correspondence or equivalence”) are contested, and the creativity of the poet-translator is assessed in terms of how the poet-translator has kept “the symmetries and pointings” – Heaney (1989: 78–79) – of the original poem. F. R. Jones gives as the aim of his essay “to explore the process of ‘recreativity’ – in other words to examine and formalize the strategies used by the skilled translator when creating a new text along the model of an existing one” (1989: 184); this is also part of my aim.

Chapter One records how poets and other writers have regarded poetic translation and how literary theory, philosophy, theology, and philological and literary scholarship have contributed to the practice of poetic translation. It is an acknowledged fact that philosophers and theologians have been influential in translation theory, but the intention is to provide new insights, especially in the chapters on Dante, into how philosophy and theology can affect the work and criticism of poetic translation and can enhance the status of poetic translation. Chapter One provides a collection of relevant quotations that are applicable to the study of poetic translation; although minimal comment on these quotations is provided in Chapter One, what others have written is used, where relevant, in the case studies (Chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five) and in the concluding chapter.

¹ Steiner (1975: 407)

Poets have written briefly about translation, usually in introductions, in short essays, or in excerpts from their writing on poetry. The poet-translator Burton Raffel has written a book called *The Art of Translating Poetry* (1988), but there is a paucity of research and a diversion of views on the subject of creative translation into poetry. Again, as F. R. Jones writes, “What the translator actually does is an under-analysed concept. . . . Where an attempt *is* made at describing translation process, they (translations) are usually seen in terms of archetype texts rather than working strategies. . . .” (1989: 184.) In the case studies and in the concluding chapter I attempt to analyse the translation process.

Charles Tomlinson (1989 and 2003) traces the history of translation into English. There is no doubt about how centrally translation figures in the work of many major English poets; yet the amount of critical attention given to their translations is comparatively small. Tomlinson detects a new interest among English poets in poetic translation in the second half of the twentieth century. There have been many well-known modern poets who have attempted creative translations. Poetic translation has, however, a low status in the history and criticism of Modern English literature. As Tomlinson states, “Our received view of English poetry is characterized by the absence of any prolonged mention of translation and its effects.” (1989: 259), or, as Steiner writes, “In the history and theory of literature translation has not been a subject of the first importance. It has figured marginally, if at all” (1975: 269). Since there are so many respected practitioners in this field among Modern English poets, it is an interesting and comparatively new field of study.

Chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five use case studies on poetic translation in which both the original work and the poetic translation are critically analysed to ascertain whether the poetic translations have captured or are able to capture what Dante referred to as “the harmony of musical connection”² of poetry.

² What Dante wrote is translated as: “nothing which hath the harmony of musical connection can be transferred from its own tongue to another without shattering all its sweetness and harmony” in *The Convivio* (Temple Classics, 1943), p. 340. This is quoted by Tomlinson (2003: 165).

The importance of a poet-translator being a sensitive critic of, or interpreter of, the original before he or she starts to translate, is emphasized, for it is only when the translator can appreciate the intricacies of the original that he or she can recreate the original into a translation that will merit praise as a good creative translation. In analysing the original and the translation, the intention is to deconstruct the original work or to pay attention to what critics of the original work and linguistic scholars have contributed to the understanding of the original work and then to discuss whether the poet-translators have benefited from critics' and scholars' contributions. What the Modern English poet-translators have written about their work of translation is also relevant. The creative translation is judged not only as translation but as creative poetry.

Seamus Heaney, with reference to the translation of Zbigniew Herbert's poetry by John and Bogdana Carpenter, writes: ". . . they seem to have managed the task of translating well; I had no sense of their coming between me and the poet's first life, no sense of their having interfered" (1989: 70). Translations, through never effacing the voice of the original but respecting it and keeping it alive, become a particularly sensitive form of literary criticism as well as creative works of art in their own right.

Form, metrics, stanza patterns, tone, imagery, and theme are emphasized in the case studies, and attention is given to the poet-translator's re-creation of the language, metre, stanza form, word order, key words, and themes and to attempts to re-create the sound, assonance, alliteration of the original. Heaney refers to the role of the translator "to try to carry the tone of (the original) across the linguistic divide" (1989: 33) and to the "fine regard for cadence and concision" (1989: 59) in translation. The translator's role is to take "the poet's discipline to heart in his translation, attempting to keep the symmetries and pointings of rhyme and stanza" (1989: 78–79) and preserving "the metaphorical basis in building" (1989: 79); the translator's task is to get "the verve and immediacy of the poems' occasions" (1989: 79) across.

The far broader theoretical basis of Derrida's deconstructionism is also relevant. (Kathleen Davis's *Deconstruction and Translation* (2001) has made the case for the link between deconstruction and translation.) As Christopher Norris states,

. . . some of Derrida's most typical deconstructive moves . . . consist in . . . the dismantling of conceptual oppositions, the taking apart of hierarchical systems of thought which can then be *reinscribed* within a different order of textual signification. . . . To 'deconstruct' a piece of writing is therefore to operate a kind of strategic reversal, seizing on precisely those unregarded details (casual metaphors, footnotes, incidental turns of argument) which are always, and necessarily, passed over by interpreters of a more orthodox persuasion. (1987: 19.)

Norris's statement about dismantling, taking apart, and reinscribing, as well as strategic reversal, is appropriate to the process of translation. Norris stresses Derrida's "repeated insistence that deconstruction is a *process*, an activity of reading, irreducible to concept or method" (1987: 27), and in many ways this is part of what must precede good creative translation – what I call "the writerly task of reading" (adapting a phrase of Bassnett (1998: 66))³ – a process, an activity of reading, irreducible to concept or method. Derrida makes many cogent observations about translation, and these show that deconstruction may contribute towards a theoretical framework for research into creative translation. Derrida's close textual analyses of Mallarmé's prose poem "Mimique" and of Paul Celan's poetry provide models for the kind of textual criticism of the original poetry and the creative translations in the case studies.

The Conclusion presents critical categories or concepts relevant to poetic translations that have been attempted in Modern English and makes critical assessments of them. It draws conclusions from the case studies and attempts to reconcile the concept of synonymity with the *exitus-reditus* process as it has been applied to poetic translation.

The contribution of poetic translation to inter-cultural studies is important. The Anglo-American world of letters has been criticised for being colonial and not sufficiently aware of the literature and culture of the rest of the world, and the growing interest in translation helps to overcome such insularity. Seamus Heaney, in referring to the translation of the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz, writes about the "impact of translation": "What translation has done over the last couple of decades is not only to introduce us to new literary traditions

³ Bassnett writes: "The task of the translator is simply a different kind of writerly task, and it follows on from the primary task of reading" (1998: 66). Bassnett refers to Barthes's notion of the "readerly" as opposed to the "writerly" in *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 3–6.

but also to link the new literary experience to a modern martyrology, a record of courage and sacrifice which elicits our unstinted admiration. . . . poets in English have felt compelled to turn their gaze East and have been encouraged to concede that the locus of greatness is shifting away from their language.” (1989: 38.) Introducing the English-speaking world to “new literary traditions” through poetic translation is important and deserves attention.

Any research at a South African university should bear in mind its relevance in the diverse context of South African culture. Translation is an exercise in cross-cultural communication and in broadening cultural horizons or in the fusion of horizons. The more a person is introduced to traditions of other cultures, the more he or she will become familiar with other cultures and no longer consider his or her narrow heritage to be of greater importance than any other.

Edwin Gentzler and Lawrence Venuti offer insights into the role of translation that are relevant to the South African context. Gentzler, in referring to “scholars in the Low Countries”, i.e. James Holmes and André Lefevere in the Netherlands and Belgium, writes:

Smaller nations with fewer people speaking ‘minor’ languages have come to depend upon translation . . . it comes as no surprise that scholars from such countries would . . . know more about translation. . . . Given the countries’ geographical location at the crossroads of European intellectual life, it is also not surprising that a new idea or at least a new perspective on the problems facing a theory of translation might find nourishment among the young and grow. Translation may have been a marginal field of investigation in countries which have larger monolingual populations, but in Belgium and the Netherlands the field of translation may unite, or at least mediate, diverse literary theories. (1993: 75–76.)

Venuti writes of his attraction “to minor literatures”: “I prefer to translate foreign texts that possess minority status in their cultures, a marginal position in their native canons – or that, in translation, can be useful in minoritizing the standard dialect and dominant cultural forms in American English” He saw this as “an opposition to the global hegemony of English”: “The economic and political ascendancy of the United States has reduced foreign languages and cultures to minorities in relation to its language and

culture.” (1999: 10.) South Africa with its “minor” languages and its “minor literatures” could benefit from Gentzler’s and Venuti’s encouraging words. It is this kind of role that translation can play in our land.

Translation plays an important part in the comparatively recent emphasis on multiculturalism as opposed to the previous emphasis on imperialism or nationalism. Edward W. Said is one of the advocates of multiculturalism among modern critics. Said remarks, “. . . cultures really are not impermeable, they are open to every other culture” (2005: 271). He advocates multiculturalism: “. . . we should read the texts of other traditions as well as the great Western texts” (2005: 393). Although the case studies are limited to the Western tradition of literature, their implications extend to translation from other cultures. There is a far greater emphasis today on comparative literature, and translation has played a vital role in comparative literature. Said states: “The politics of identity is the problem: the failure to take account of, and accept, the migratory quality of experience; that everybody is a migrant or an exile” (2005: 221). Those living in multicultural South Africa with its destructive history of apartheid and nationalism may be able to understand better “the migratory quality of experience”.

Ariel Dorfman, another migrant, considers “. . . there are . . . strong forces in the world today which are pushing us towards multilingualism as a real alternative” to monolingualism and he suggests, “The primary factor, I would wager, is the sheer mass of migration” (2011: 130). In a multilingual country like South Africa in today’s world the views of Edward W. Said, Ariel Dorfman, and George Steiner, all migrants of some kind, are perhaps more valuable than the “excessive hegemony”⁴ of monolingualism.

Timothy Clark refers to “the cultural politics paradigm”, which “became an orthodoxy” during the 1990s (2005: 1). He mentions “the broadly deterministic categories of culturalism, which strives to explain all in terms of social location” (2005: 12). Later, he writes, “From a genuinely international perspective there is yet another striking aspect of the cultural politics paradigm in criticism. Its generally ‘modernist’ culture matches

⁴ Dorfman (2011: 131)

exactly one of the most familiar and insidious traits of American nationalism, its aggressively self-idealising exceptionalism” (2005: 24–25). This quotation shows the similarity between, on the one hand, Said’s criticism of nationalism and his advocacy of multiculturalism and, on the other, Clark’s criticism of the “cultural politics paradigm” and his advocacy of “singularity”.

Clark’s book on singularity poses a challenge to the claims of translation. At the end of his book Clark states, “To treat something as singular may be to move towards the idea of seeing it as irreplaceable, sole witness of what it says, an example only of itself, and thus ‘free’ in the sense of not being fully intelligible in the broadly deterministic categories which strive to explain all in terms of social location” (2005: 159). This echoes a frequent statement in Clark’s book that a singular work of literature is “untranslatable”. He writes: “. . . the literary is singular in the broad sense of being ‘untranslatable’ and the lyric is most so” (2005: 72). He quotes Gadamer on the “limit of translatability”: “Only one who is at home in a language is able to experience the self-preserving and self-determining statement of the poetic word . . .” (2005: 84). Then he writes, “Language . . . resists restatement or translation . . .” (2005: 84). On the next page he quotes Gadamer’s view of translation as “the illusion of a free and unrestricted transposition of thought” and on the following page Clark comments:

. . . Languages, for Gadamer, are not closed off sets of projections and representations: they are horizons open to each other. . . . The situation of the translator, however, is only the most striking instance for Gadamer of the dilemma of the interpreter in general, positioned between the resistance or the uniqueness of a text and that destruction at work in saying it in other words. In this way, the burden of the translator is that of any reader, confronted with a resaying of the *Unvordenkliche*, so that there is only a difference in degree, not kind, between the situations of the reader of Celan in German and the reader of Celan in English, or even in Japanese. The situation of each is not opaque to the others, only hazy (*das Leben ist diesig*). So a translation, writes Gadamer, is ‘at once clearer and flatter than the original’ (*Truth and Method*, p. 386). Its singularity is not that of an irreducible *mythos* – for instance, it is permissible to modify the wording of a translation but not that of the original (though, of course, some translations, such as the Septuagint or the King James Bible, may themselves acquire the mythic authority of originals). (2005: 86.)

This quotation demonstrates some of the problems of translating poetry from one language to another, but Clark has to admit that translation of poetry from one language to another (here the translation of Celan's into English) has its place and that "there is only a difference of degree, not kind, between the reader of Celan in German and the reader of Celan in English". He even admits that ". . . some translations . . . may acquire the mythic authority of originals". The singularity of good poetry presents a challenge to every poet-translator.

Since translation of poetry into poetry is the main focus, literary translation theory is of prime importance. Poetic translation does, however, require a philological and cultural theoretical framework, as well as a literary theory framework. An understanding of the culture and tradition of the original work is also necessary. Susan Bassnett refers to translation as "intercultural transfer" and emphasizes the contribution of translation as "cultural (re)negotiation": "Translation is, after all, dialogic in its very nature, involving as it does more than one voice. The study of translation, like the study of culture, needs a plurality of voices. And, similarly, the study of culture involves an examination of the process of encoding and decoding that comprises translation." (1998: 139.)

The translation of the original poem into Modern English poetry requires the fusion of the language, culture, tradition, and creative work of the original artist with the traditional appreciation of that artist's work over succeeding generations, with the modern poet-translator's response to the poetry through his understanding and re-creation, with the response of the modern readers of this translation in a new language and in a different cultural setting, and with the changing literary and cultural traditions of the future readers of the original and the translation. In order to achieve this fusion, the concept of "alterity" (Schleiermacher) or "otherness" (Warren) – of maintaining the original creativity and essence in the translation – is an important factor. If the translation is to succeed as lasting creative translation, it will not pander to modern colloquialisms that will not survive, but must rather strive towards a purity of language that will have more chance of surviving the changes of language.

Many Modern English translators have translated foreign poetry into English; the best poetic translations are creative in their own right and can be honoured with the name of creative poetic translations. The task of the poet-translator is in some ways the same as the task of the poet: for it is only the poet whose work will survive after his death and whose work will have an afterlife, who will be regarded as a great poet; and, similarly with the poet-translator: it is only the poet-translator whose work will survive his own culture or tradition who will be regarded as a great poet-translator. The criteria for great creative writing and great creative translation are similar, but the task of the poet-translator is different: he or she has to have all the qualities of a reader, an interpreter or critic, a poet, and a translator. The creative poetic translation is “less a copy than a transmutation”, as Octavio Paz has said⁵, and the work of creative transmutation is that of a poet-translator, as opposed to a verse-translator. (The term, transmutation, is used also by Roman Jakobson in his “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”⁶.)

Although the task of the poet-translator is different from the task of the poet, the original poem and the poetic translation must be judged according to the same criteria of literary criticism. And that is why the theoretical framework of the case studies is primarily literary criticism and only secondarily translation theory. George Steiner’s *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975) combines the two well.

In any discussion of the methodology of research that involves literary criticism, the dilemma of subjective literary criticism will arise. It is my intention, in assessing the achievement of Modern English poet-translators, to arrive at objective findings about the practice of poetic translation that will be useful to poet-translators and to inter-cultural studies.

It is one of my convictions that there should in the case studies be a constant dialogue between the original and the translation and that the original poetry should be placed alongside the poetic translation. This necessitates that often a smaller type-font and/or

⁵ As quoted by Susan Bassnett (1998: 66).

⁶ In Reuben A. Brower (Ed.) (1959) *On Translation*, Harvard University Press.

single spacing has sometimes to be used in order to place the poem or extract on the same page as the translation.