

# Translation and English Literary History

## A bibliographical essay<sup>1</sup>

José María Pérez Fernández

English Department

University of Granada

Books reviewed

Fred Schurink, ed. *Tudor Translation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Stuart Gillespie. *English Translation and Classical Reception. Towards a New Literary History*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Matthew Reynolds. *The Poetry of Translation. From Chaucer & Petrarch to Homer & Logue*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011.

The academic disciplines that incorporate translation as part of their outlook currently oscillate between cultural studies and the linguistics-oriented and well established field of translation studies. Whereas the latter focuses on texts from the empirical stance of applied linguistics and/or discourse analysis, for the former the concept of translation comprehends a much larger set of phenomena which includes non-verbal signifiers, and frequently views them through the theoretical lens of post-structuralism or cultural anthropology. An eclectic third space that combines aspects of these two approaches has emerged lately thanks to a renovated interest in the role played by translation in the construction of cultural identities and literary traditions.

The three volumes under review share this sort of approach to the origins and development of the English canon. In varying degrees, each of them also focuses on the strategies and the agents that intervened in the transfer of cultural legitimacy from classical Rome and Greece for the construction of all sorts of English identities. Stuart Gillespie's *English Translation and Classical Reception* reminds us that the rise of the British Empire ran parallel with eighteenth-century Augustanism and its systematic campaign to appropriate the cultural capitals of Greece and Rome through the translation and imitation of their great authors as much as through architectural and artistic emulation. This process was preceded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the dramatic expansion of English that resulted from the importation of foreign lexical goods. Fred Schurink's *Tudor Translation* demonstrates in great detail that this trend had been long in the making, so that by the end of the eighteenth century some of these Classical texts had been so successfully naturalised that in many cases their original status as alien cultural artefacts had vanished. With their close analysis of very recent translations, Gillespie and Reynolds testify to the consistency of this tradition and to the current relevance of great Greek and Roman poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a preliminary version of an article which will be published in *Sendeban*. I am grateful to the editors of the journal for the permission granted to publish this preview in our institutional repository.

The three books reviewed here provide a rich and detailed panorama of literary translation in England from the sixteenth century until our own days as they also reflect on its historical, cultural and theoretical implications.

In his introduction to *Tudor Translation*, Fred Schurink emphasizes the shortcomings of traditional translation studies when it comes to the assessment of the cultural impact of literary translation, and the need for a fresh perspective in literary history that can take stock of its actual relevance. Indeed, if there ever was an inherently interdisciplinary subject, it is translation studies, and of necessity the scholar who approaches these phenomena must branch out towards types of transference other than mere semantic carrying-over, or literary influence as this was traditionally understood in comparative literature. But we must be also aware of the pitfalls that lurk in overextending the reach of this concept. Reynolds sensibly proclaims that “I do not assume that the ‘many different kinds of thing’ that may be called ‘translation’ need have some theorizable essence in common just because they can be given the same name.”

Reynolds then proceeds to examine and illustrate with a profusion of case studies the different definitions of translation and metaphor—another concept whose etymology involves the notion of carrying over. His survey covers a large collection of samples that go from secondary literature like Lakoff & Johnson’s classic volume on metaphor, to the philosophical insights of Jacques Derrida. As he ponders the implications of the several usages and meaning—both figurative and literal—of the concept of translation (mainly in English, but also in other languages) Reynolds also provides a summary of the most relevant postulates and recent publications in the field of translation studies. This is a section of his book that readers will undoubtedly find very useful as an introduction to the topic.

Reynolds calls his protean subject “the poetry of translation”, by which he means those poems that evince a “creative interaction between the source text and the way it is translated”. These are poems in which a certain perceived quality—which the translator deems as inherent in its original conception—also informs the translation itself. In Reynolds’s view this lends these particular poems an “aesthetic charge” that redefines the concept of translation. He profusely illustrates the list of translatorial metaphors that constitute the backbone of his book with samples of English translations. The book concludes with a chapter devoted to Golding’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and important references to Dryden’s famous translation of Book XV (“On the Pythagorean Philosophy”), which he uses to discuss metamorphosis as one of the most insightful tropes for translation.

Gillespie also turns to Dryden’s Ovid to illustrate how certain translations can beget fresh and original poems as well as other new translations. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is indeed a classic in English translation studies, since the poem can be read as figurative of the transformations set in motion by literary translation. This concept of literary canons as protean substances driven by translation is suggestive of their fluid complexity and multidirectional processes. Both Gillespie and Reynolds examine the gaps and the continuities between imitation, paraphrase, translation, and free translation. The resulting picture *de facto* underlines the thread that brings continuity to the processes involved in the composition, interpretation and reading of poetry, as much as in its rendering into another

language. All of which goes to confirm that poetic canons are built up through creatively heuristic, imitative and allusive processes in which translation and the constellation of cognates that are part of its epistemological cluster play a fundamental role.

Translation as interpretation is another of the metaphors analysed by Reynolds. And although in the course of his detailed analysis he sets off with reservations about those views that identify translation and interpretation, he is eventually led to conclude that “as a metaphor for translation, ‘interpretation’ is ... unavoidable and treacherous” (Reynolds 2011 p. 69). After his account of Edward FitzGerald’s influence upon some of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, he also ends up acknowledging the continuities between reading, translation and imitation. And the three chapters that he devotes to Dryden lead to the somewhat paradoxical insight that although translation is not interpretation, they are nevertheless “inseparably and agonistically intertwined”. Reynold’s volume puts together a wealth of case studies that illustrate the translatorial shifts and turns in the English canon, all of them analysed with sophisticated linguistic acumen and the aesthetic sensibility of a seasoned reader of poetry. His palette goes from Homer to Chaucer, Virgil to Dryden, and then all the way forward to the late twentieth-century free versions of Homer by Christopher Logue—with incursions into Byron, Keats, Pound or Heaney’s *Beowulf*.

In his last chapter, Gillespie focuses on Ted Hughes’s translation of Homer—which provides an interesting comparison with Reynold’s account of Logue’s rendering. Both volumes are complementary in this, and in other respects too. Gillespie raises his reader’s awareness to a current new golden age of translation by providing an account of practising poets who have engaged in fresh versions of classical Roman and Greek authors. As he does so he also discusses the two alternatives that translators are presented with, to wit either updating the original text by bringing it closer to the language of the translator’s day, or pushing the target language towards a reproduction of the diction, style, and tone of the original. A most interesting account this proves to be: he compares Hughes’s Homer as an example of the latter, and Edward FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát* as a case for the former. Gillespie summarizes this contrast in a brilliant paragraph that presents two of the main choices that translators must confront when bracing themselves for the task of delivering a fresh text for their readers.

In another interesting twist that elaborates on the sinuous and fluid nature of literary canons, Gillespie demonstrates how the canon of classical Roman and Greek poetry, originally the source of legitimacy and literary capital transferred to the English tradition, was, in its own turn, “reciprocally affected” (p. 93). He illustrates this with an account of the relation between Shakespeare, Greek Tragedy and Plutarch, a case in which “Shakespeare... has been ‘read back’ on to the Greeks” (p. 47). This process was mediated by Sir Thomas North’s English translation of Plutarch, which was the source of much of the material in Shakespeare’s Roman plays. North, in turn, translated from the French rendering of the Greek original penned by Jacques Amyot—one of the most important translators in early modern Europe. And Shakespeare’s prominence in the Western canon has finally led contemporary critics and readers to a new awareness of Aeschylus and Euripides as seen through the eyes of the Bard. Gillespie emphasises that Roman literature itself was built upon translations of Greek authors, and we can thus ask ourselves to what extent Seneca’s Roman tragedies—the closest Shakespeare actually got to Greek tragedy—were translations of sorts from their Greek counterparts. Episodes like this turn Gillespie’s book into a fresh and timely reminder that we do need to reassess the impact of the classics upon vernacular literary canons. He demonstrates, for instance, how through his

translation and imitation of Juvenal, the young Wordsworth liberated the Roman poet from a calcified neoclassical reading, and also how viewing Wordsworth's Romanticism from the perspective of this early translation throws new light on the sort of poetics that constituted the starting point for his literary career. We end up, besides, with a fresh reassessment of what Juvenal means for us today, and of his place within the canon of English translations.

Like Reynolds, Gillespie also approaches the continuum between translation and imitation, and illustrates it with an account of the alternative strategies adopted by modern translators of classical authors. Among these he includes for instance the homophonic versions of Catullus produced by Celia and Louis Zukofsky, aimed at the mere "reproduction of phonetic values"; or Hilda Doolittle's imagist rendering of certain Greek lyrics—in particular her strikingly effective and beautiful version of the first chorus of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Gillespie also explores the liminal space inhabited by translation, imitation, and poetic invention through a close analysis of Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. He concludes his survey of Pound and Doolittle's versions with an insightful paragraph on creative translation, which he describes as the sort of rendering that can reintroduce the original author into the target language as absolutely fresh and relevant. Gillespie manages to persuade his reader of the need for a new literary and cultural history that situates translation—*qua* carrying over and communication, as much as a heuristic process—at its core. In the same way as not infrequently canons rely on a series of readings and misreadings, these new literary and cultural histories might as well amount to a topography of translations *and* mistranslations.

Reynolds also traces a long strand in the English tradition of translations that connects poet-translators like Dryden, Pound, or Lowell, and goes back to Richard Rolle's 1340 translation of the Psalter. This leads him again to an acknowledgement of the actual continuum that exists between literal translation and interpretation. The fabulous expression coined by Chapman, who describes the creative translation of poetry as "with Poesie to open Poesie", launches Reynolds onto a discussion of the metaphor of translation as an *opening* through an exploration of vernacular versions of the Bible, where translation amounts to *opening up* in a process of textual as much as doctrinal and spiritual liberation.

As mentioned above, Fred Schurink's collection focuses on Tudor England, a period during which the appropriation of religious and doctrinal legitimacy was of paramount importance. He shares with the two other volumes reviewed here an impressive and revealing wealth of examples and case studies. As the editor emphasizes in his introduction, translation was a central part of the early modern educational programme. Authors and scholars were trained in a combination of rhetorical drills with the system of double translation, whose stylistic and compositional habits must have remained deeply ingrained in their adult careers as literary and cultural agents. Furthermore—as Hadfield's chapter on Spenser demonstrates—many of these authors cut their teeth in the business of poetic composition through translation. Warren Boutcher's account of Christopher Watson traces the paths that led to his rendering of Polybius, and proves how the transfer and circulation of pre-existing tropes, *topoi* and narratives—after they had been duly dismembered and fragmented for the convenience of the translator and his patrons—were used for the creation of all sorts of identities and cultural artefacts.

The cases provided by Schurink's collection demonstrate that we must regard translations as autonomous literary artefacts as we simultaneously redirect our gaze towards the reception of these texts, the material conditions, and the cultural contexts within which they were produced. This involves taking into consideration the status of translators as *über-readers* who filter their original texts and hence determine their eventual mode of reception. Schurink's volume provides a profusion of case studies that substantiate these theoretical claims and allow for the contemplation of translation as an agent of cultural change. Translation as cultural history does intersect with a large array of other disciplines in the humanities, which include the history of reading, the history of education, the history of the book, as well as social, religious, and even economic history. If we take the concept of translation as standing for *interpretation* as a cyclical mode of codification, reception, and re-codification of multi-modal cultural icons, it does indeed stand at the centre of cultural studies.

Robert Cummings's chapter in Schurink's collection provides a particularly interesting case. Its subject is Josuah Sylvester's English translation of Du Bartas's *Les Semaines*. This French poem was in the first place put together by simply adapting or translating, and then amplifying, previously existing texts. This led in turn to its reading as an encyclopedia of poetically articulated knowledge and to its use as a source for oracles, sayings and other poetic devices which were then set in prolific circulation. A prominent case of this recirculation led Shakespeare to *transfer* Du Bartas's praise of France into his own famous speech about "This royal throne of kings, this scept'ed isle" in *Richard II*. And Shakespeare in turn influenced Sylvester's own English rendering of Du Bartas. It is no less significant that one of the paths through which Shakespeare's version of the text reached Sylvester was *England's Parnassus*, Robert Allott's poetical dictionary—and as such another fragmentary cultural artefact engaged in canon construction, which was in turn used as a source of copia and *topoi*.

Andrew Hadfield's chapter describes the international polyglot environment within which the poet Edmund Spenser grew up. Mid-sixteenth-century London was a booming metropolis that teemed with foreign diplomats, merchants, printers and religious exiles. This situation linked London with a wide network of European connections, as it also fostered the production of volumes in several languages. The subject of Hadfield's chapter is Spenser's translations of certain poems by Du Bartas which appeared in Jan van der Noot's *A Theatre for Voluptuous Wordlings*—itself a sophisticated multi-authored product that involved, in Hadfield's description, "production techniques that signified a juxtaposition of European and English culture, relevant to a translated work produced in exile".

Warren Boutcher's chapter also makes a very strong case for a much needed European and interdisciplinary perspective on Tudor translation. Watson's Polybius illustrates the relations between translation, historiography, and nation building. These are years that coincide with the early period of Elizabeth's reign, when the queen's scholars and her political agents were struggling for an institutional settlement that could define the country's cultural and national identity. The subject of Fred Schurink's chapter is closely related to Boutcher's topic, since he deals with Anthony Cope's translation of Livy's *The historie of two of the moste noble captaines of the worlde, Anniball and Scipio* (1544). Livy illustrates the point made by Gillespie in his own volume about the *translation* of Greek texts into the Roman canon: Livy is the quasi-*translator* of Polybius's Greek texts within the Roman historiographical canon, which are then appropriated by its early modern European

translators to pursue their own national vernacular agendas. Schurink precisely aims to throw new light on what he calls “pragmatic humanism”, i.e. the sort of scholarship that appropriated texts from the Classics with a view to their practical application to current concerns.

This process of appropriation from Classical historians and epic poets during the Tudor period constitutes an important precedent to the more systematic appropriation that took place during the eighteenth century, as described by Gillespie and Reynolds. The similarities and contrasts between them, and the fact that they transcend mere literary history to venture into the field of cultural identities and the appropriation of political legitimacy, demonstrates that an intelligently comprehensive understanding of the concept of translation and the fields where its heuristic power can be applied will indeed provide fresh insights into much under-researched areas in national traditions. The three volumes reviewed here go a long way towards providing both ample and profound vistas of the English situation between the sixteenth and the twenty-first centuries as they open up new paths for further research.