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The Poet as Translator: The Poetic Vision of John Betjeman

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Abstract

Rainer Maria Rilke (1989) describes the quest of the poet as that of saying the "unsayable." Similarly, poets like Ezra Pound and Octavio Paz suggest that when the poetic essence is beyond the words, then the poem enters the realm of the "untranslatable" and invites an act of translation. John Betjeman recognizes the complexity that is inherent to the heritage of the Modernist School which renders poetry to be as incomprehensible as any foreign language. This paper argues that Betjeman diverts from the stylistic density of the Modernist tradition because he discerns a similar unintelligibility in a receding English culture. Hence, translation becomes not only a vocation but an inevitability that looms large considering the social and political upheavals he witnessed. Drawing on Rilke and Paz's understanding of the act of translation as seeking meaning "beyond the words per se" (Jackson, 2011), this paper explores Betjeman's attempts to translate a condition which is both "unsayable" and foreign, which afflicted Englishness as a cultural locus.

Key words: John Betjeman; Translator; 20th Century British Poet; Modernism

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1. Introduction

John Betjeman's accession to the Laureateship in 1973 was not entirely welcomed by the majority of critics. He writes in very traditional forms, his language is too colloquially oriented, they say, his feet are here, in the Modernist Age, while his heart and mind wander alone so frequently in the Victorian era as he swam against the poetic currents that the Modernists dictated. Defended by some critics against claims that he was undeservedly promoted to the position of a T.V. entertainer or a cult figure, Betjeman remains a controversial figure (Gardner, 2004; Manwaring, 2006). This paper explores how, in John Betjeman's poetic world, the poet is not a versifier whose only task is to produce pleasurable poetic tapestries; rather the poet is a translator and a cultural informant in a world in which the readers are mostly tourists who are in dire need of someone who knows how to restore a receding rural beauty so they can enjoy their stay in what remains of the aesthetically pleasing, Victorian England.

2. Translation and Poetry

In his essay "The Poet as Translator," Kenneth Rexroth (1987) draws attention to how translation and poetry intersect through their similar impact on the author at work: "The writer who can project himself into exultation of another learns more than the craft of words. He learns the stuff of poetry" (p. 190). Richard Jackson (2011) points out that "translation is at the heart of poetry" and stresses how Rainer Maria Rilke, in his "Ninth Elegy," describes the return of the poet with the "unsayable." The poet

> returns from the mountain slopes into the valley,
> he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but instead
> some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and blue
> gentian. Perhaps we are here in order to say: house,
> bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window–
> at most: column, tower … But to say them, you must understand,
> oh to say them more intensely than the Things themselves
> ever dreamed of existing. (1989, p. 71)

In the sense, delving into the connotative meanings that certain poetry evokes is itself an act of translation:

> Rilke's notion that words only metaphorically stand for ideas, sensations and feelings suggests that they are themselves a form of translation. Of course, this could lead us quickly into a maze of problems and suggest that even a poem in our own language must be "translated." What is at issue in translating poetry is the very nature of poetry, and the very nature of language. The main problems and debates that arise concerning the translation of poetic works occur when one realizes to what extent the essence of a poem lies, as Rilke and Rexroth suggest, beyond the words *per se*. (Jackson, 2011)

This peculiar notion of translating poetry, that Rilke implies and Jackson ventures to explain, entails an act of giving voice to mute "Things themselves" (Rilke, 1989, p. 71) and life to seemingly inanimate objects to the mind of the casual observer. The poet becomes a translator when he or she possesses the gift of generating a sequence of

animated images out of an already eroded condition, namely, a culture, a memory or a location, which every day words would normally fail to revive. The notion of poetry as a form of translation, after all, is not really unheard of:

> 'Poetry is what is lost in translation,' wrote Robert Frost … Or as Octavio Paz, the Mexican Nobel prize winning poet says, 'poetry is what gets transformed.' Ezra Pound, in 'How To read,' describes three aspects of the language of poetry: *melopoeia,* its music; *phanopoeia,* the imagistic quality; and *logopoeia,* 'the dance of the intellect among words.' It is this last aspect that Pound says is the essence of poetry, Rilke's unsayable. What Brodsky, Pound and Paz were driving at was that there are intangible things, that the realm of the wordless and visionary … is both untranslatable while also being the essence of poetry. (Jackson, 2011)

It is that ambiguous aspect of life that poetry tends to translate into words. The "intangible" that gets transformed in words and visual images is the very source and relish of poetry.

Octavio Paz takes poetry beyond the textual level: "After all, poetry is not merely the text … The text is signs – these signs can be written or oral, and they produce meanings. Signs are material things, you can see or hear them" (Honig, 1985, p. 154). In this sense, the material essence from which poetry emerges is a fabric of those signs that "are material things, you can see or hear." The poet's task is, much in the spirit of a translator, to transform these intangible signs into a text. The text is, therefore, a lingual replica of the original source which resonates with what translation is all about since "translation is an art of analogy, the art of finding correspondences. An art of shadows and echoes … of producing, with a different text, a poem similar to the original" (Honig, 1985, p. 154). Incidentally, both poet and translator participate in that act of recreating an object so it transforms itself from being intangible into something perceptible, breathing and breath-taking.

3. Features of John Betjeman's Literary works

That defining attribute of transforming the intangible into the discernible was a vocation that has characterized John Betjeman's life and career. "He is a reporter-poet, a suburban remembrance, a broadcaster-poet, whose images are never so finely tuned that you require special antennae to receive them" (Delaney, 1983, p. 7). Betjeman, in this sense, acquires the position of a mediator who has the talent to turn what is normally concealed into something quite conspicuous. "Throughout the 1960s, John worked on a television ABC of Churches with the BBC producer Kenneth Savidge ... Savidge thought that John was a television 'natural': 'I don't know what it means, except that I recognize it when I see it. It's nothing to do with technique ... the great thing about John was that he wanted you to share his love and enthusiasm'" (Hillier, 1988, p. 418).

Betjeman was born in 1906 and his childhood was spent either in Cornwall or in Highgate. Having a keen eye for natural beauty, the child was indeed the Wordsworthian father of man who later at Oxford developed an extraordinary familiarity with Victorian bypaths. His poetry is extensively influenced by his upbringing. His interest in both his childhood and

Victorian locality grew up with him and eventually helped him shape the future poet as he declares in his autobiographical poem "Summoned by Bells":

For myself,

> I knew as soon as I could read and write
> That I must be a poet. Even today,
> When all the way from Cambridge comes a wind
> To blow the lamps out every time they're lit,
> I know that I must light mine up again. (1976, p. 67)

It goes without saying that Betjeman had a profound interest in the past. However, it is Betjeman's own sense of the word "past" as a signifier and not as a mere descriptor that situates his designation as a poet-translator to the modern reader. At face value, it seems a combination of infancy and an inclination towards a vanished Victorian era; however, Betjeman's poetry goes beyond sheer reminiscences as it resonates with social and cultural implications.

Broadly speaking, the influence of childhood on the formation of character and temperament stretches generally to include names such as: D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) and George C. Barker (1870-1936) who were contemporary writers of Betjeman's. Although this analogy is fair to a certain extent, Lawrence's poetry portrays his childhood as an emotional response to parental quarrels evoked in the poem "Discord in Childhood." In fact, in his preface to the American edition of *New Poems*, Lawrence finds the poetry of here and now preferable to that of the past or the future "the poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present. In the immediate present there is no perfection, nor consummation, nothing finished" (French, 1985, p. 96). For Dylan Thomas, childhood, as for Wordsworth, reflects a state of innocence and exhilaration which is idealized in "Fern Hill." To George C. Barker, the child, who is only part of a memory, is an image which intensifies the fearful reality of death as exemplified in "Elegy on Spain." In other words, the past is barely visualized for its own sake but rather personalized or utilized and is always a reminder of or a comment on the present reality. Betjeman seeks something else in his depiction of the past. Although for most of his contemporaries the past is illusive and unhomely, however, for Betjeman, it is regional, aesthetic and can actually be chased and whose presence and essence can actually be captured, and yet not without assistance.

Betjeman's sense of childhood is not, as the case with Lawrence, exclusively personal, or a reminder of an irretrievable time as the poetry of both Thomas and Barker suggests (Thwaite, 1978; Deutsch, 1975). His childhood provides him with that type of joy captured by the beholder or the visual awareness that the eyewitness entertains. In 'Middlesex', Betjeman escorts the reader "down a High Road in the gallant County of Middlesex" to see its "gardens full of second-hand motor-cars for sale and piles of tyres. The stench and noise were terrific" (Guest, 1978, p. 191). And suddenly we are reminded that it was once "the county which inspired Keats when he stood tiptoe on a hilltop" (Guest, 1978, p. 191). Betjeman invokes the past, as he himself admits, neither to escape the present or death nor to "breed perpetual benediction" as Wordsworth puts it, but out of urgency and the need for survival: "Probably there is no turning back for that reason every acre where there is still

quiet and the smell of grass and the sound of brooks becomes more precious and essential for our recreation." (Guest, 1978, p. 192). The past in this sense becomes a signifier that provokes social concerns that, otherwise, would have remained obscure and hidden from public gaze.

Betjeman wants to deliver the message that he himself, like many men of his generation, feels trapped in this already framed, progressive discourse that is too imperceptive and subtle for so many people to recognize: "Popular and superficial accounts of Betjeman portray him as an idolater of the past, with a special fondness for Victorian buildings even when they are third-rate; as compulsive protester who leaps into action whenever any kind of ancient relic is threatened … Such a portrait of Betjeman is a mere caricature" (Press, 1974, p. 11). Betjeman does not idealize. Reversibly, in his article "Middlesex," he comes out as a realist whose references to the past are colored with a sense of urgency: "I don't say the High Road was more hygienic than it is now, but I do say it was pleasanter and one could sleep … without the united aid of sleeping pills, ear plugs and double glazing" (p. 192). Betjeman is, in a sense, morally urging all to make hay while the sun shines: "Unless there is public will to preserve and maintain the wild and natural, the old and gentle, then all the Home Counties will suffer the same fate" (p. 193).

As far as his poetry is concerned, Betjeman's poem 'Middlesex' is a case in point. Presumably, the poem describes the return of Elaine (notice the Tennysonian name) from work in Central London to her suburban home. The poem betrays a sense of the bitterness of loss amid the seeming gaiety:

> Gaily into Ruislip Gardens
> Runs the red electric train
> With a thousand Ta's and Pardon's
> Daintily alights Elaine;
> Hurries down the concrete station
> With a frown concentration
> Out into the outskirt's edges
> Where a few surviving hedges
> Keep alive our lost Elysium – rural Middlesex again. (Guest, 1978, p. 92).

The last two lines are very telling of the poet's intense awareness of a dissipating beauty. Then, in the third stanza, the poem gradually changes its direction. A recollection of a past time is invoked with a sympathetic utterance: "Gentle Brent, I used to know you". Betjeman, however, is not merely grieving over a no longer leaping heart, rather his insight takes him to the heart of the matter: 'Now what change your waters show you/In the meadowlands you fill'. The change is apparent only to an eye accustomed to the place. The poet here is an observer who tries hard to 'recollect the elm-trees misty/And the footpaths climbing twisty'. Betjeman, therefore, attempts to translate his foreboding sense of the future through the prevalent motif of the ubi sunt or "where-are" formula for lamenting the vanished past as he asks about the things which were so peculiar to the life he enjoyed once:

> Parish of enormous hayfields
> Perivale stood all alone,

And from Greenford scent of mayfields
Most enticingly was blown
Over market gardens tidy,
Taverns for the bona fide,
Cockney anglers, cockney shooters,
Murray Poshes, Lupin Pooters
Long in Kensal Green and Highgate silent under soot and stone. (Guest, 1978, p. 19).

The final stanza takes the reader back to the old good times of the 'bona fide, Cockncy anglers, cockney shooters, / Murray Poshes, Lupin Pooters' a time which, to Betjeman, can only be Victorian. On face value, the poem betrays Betjeman's sense of "nostalgia for the vanished world of his childhood and of vintage London" (Press, 1974, p. 37). However, what the poet attempts to translate here to the modern reader is a foreign world "when sweated labour, cheap domestic help and the laws of a rigidly hierarchical society kept his parents in comfort and the workers in their proper station" (Press, 1974, p. 38).

"The Metropolitan Railway" is another poem which places the past and the present side by side, the way a skeptic translator puts the source text next to the target text and questions the transition. The poet urges progress as personified by the metropolitan railway to pause a bit and ponder the implications of change: 'Early Electric! Sit you down and see'. The consequent desolation of transition and vicissitude is implicated as the irony in the poem "is directed against a married couple of his own class whose youthful dreams have faded since Edwardian days" (Press, 1974, p. 39):

Cancer has killed him. Heart is killing her.
The trees are down. An Odeon flashes fire
Where stood their villa by the murmuring fir
When 'they would for their children's good conspire '.
Of all their loves and hopes on hurrying feet
Thou art the worn memorial, Baker Street. (Guest, 1978, p. 52).

Similar stresses and strains are expressed in 'Cornwall', which accentuates nostalgic feelings: "when I first came to Cornwall over fifty years ago, as a small boy ... there was only one motor car. Everyone in the village had oil lamps and candles." His concern is to sustain the crude beauty of 'old and beautiful Cornwall'. His happiness, in childhood, springs not from the fact that Time will 'let me hail and climb / Golden in the heydays of his eyes' as Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) prays, or from dancing 'and come tumbling into the moon' in a dreamlike fantasy as Walter De La Mare (1873-1956) does, but out of a romantic attachment of the past to the present: "The romantic view of the Cornish and Cornwall has continued until the present day" (Guest, 1987, p. 194).

The foreign element is often dramatized as a representation of Progress as allegorized in the image of the "Early electric." It disrupts the flow of period and location. However, if it is absent or simply not introduced then the poet's role is not that of a translator but rather celebratory in nature:

[Betjeman] distrusts progress and believes that change is, more often than not, for the worse. He hates big business and the profit-motive with as much fervor as any Marxist. The property developers who destroy communities – he has called it a kind of 'robbery' to deprive people of their familiar surroundings in this way – are the objects of his particular hatred. (Lane, 1983, p. 13)

His poem "The Village Inn," for instance, is a denunciation of the prevalent disposition to modernize and an assertion towards the hygienic and healthy past. Betjeman (1978) narrates the "the metamorphosis of the old pub into the 'sanit'ry' new one … by 'simultaneous' topographical description" (Brown, 1999, p. 14). This happening or this "metamorphosis" is never lost in translating the change or chronicling the transition:

Ah, where's the inn that once I knew
With brick and chalky wall
Up which the knobby pear - tree grew
For fear the place would fall.

Oh, that old pot - house isn't there,
It wasn't worth our while;
You'll find we have rebuilt 'The Bear'
In Early Georgian style. (Guest, 1978, p. 123).

Like Rainer Maria Rilke's narrator in his "Ninth Elegy" who describes the return of the poet with the "unsayable," Betjeman is a traveler who returns to his local village to undergo a similar shocking experience as the village moved from being the locale of "the dear old inn, / So ancient, clean and free from sin" into the "unsayable" feeling of "a filthy swine / For loathing beer and liking wine."

The nostalgic mood fairly keeps pace in "Greenaway" and then gradually breaks into that untranslatable surge which according to Octavio Paz (Jackson 2011) brings the essence of poetry. Greenaway is a rocky shingle beach in Cornwall, the county where Betjeman spent his childhood:

I know so well this turfy mile,
These clumps of sea-pink withered brown,
The breezy cliff, the awkward stile,
The sandy path that takes me down.

I know the roughly blasted track
That skirts a small and smelly boy
And over squelching bladder - wrack
Leads to the beach at Greenaway. (Guest, 1978, p. 126).

Betjeman implies that fear and doubt, which are like tides in a nightmarish dream, washed away the former feeling of repose in nature. Like Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," the theme is probably the ebbing of a past memory or faith and Betjeman's consequent perplexity

as "the scene becomes psychologized" as the poem mirrors "personal terror at possible helplessness and extinction" (Brown, 1999, p. 14):

> But in a dream the other night,
> I saw this coastline from the sea
> And felt the breakers plunging white
> Their weight of waters over me. (Guest, 1978, p. 126).

Betjeman uses words as signifiers in terms of inanimate things such as "dream," "night," "sea," and "water," a practice which evokes what Rilke and Rexroth suggested as the essence of poetry as translation that is when poetry goes "beyond the words *per se*. (Jackson 2011).

Betjeman's "Norfolk" expresses the quintessence of Betjeman's experience as it appeals to a mood and a moment. The lost Elysium here radiates clearer than ever. The poem begins with an exclamation that indicates the poet's consciousness of a fallen state:

> How did the Devil come! When first attack?
> These Norfolk lanes recall lost innocence,
> T he years fall off and find me walking back
> Dragging a stick along the wooden fence
> Down this some path, where, forty years ago,
> My father strolled behind me, calm and slow. (Guest, 1978, p. 144)

The sense of change evokes memories, which the poet effortlessly narrates with easiness. The language is eligible and self-explanatory, although a sense of impending foreign intrusion looms large:

> I used to fill my hand with sorrel seeds
> And shower him with them from the tops of stiles,
> I used to butt my head into his tweeds
> To make him hurry down those lunguorous miles... (Guest, 1978, p. 144)

The sudden invasion of the "Devil" disrupts the feelings of repose and foreignness prevails. The poet as translate here takes over as Betjeman invokes Time to bring back the old rapture and peace:

> How did the Devil come? When first attack?
> The church is just the same, though now I know
> Fowler of Louth restored it. Time, bring back
> The rapturous ignorance of long ago,
> The peace, before the dreadful daylight starts,
> Of unkept promises and broken hearts. (Guest, 1978, p. 145)

Betjeman's "Norfolk" can be viewed as a dramatization of how the poet speaks of the "unsayable" which is that demonic force that caused these "Norfolk lanes" to dissipate. What resonates with Rilke's understanding of the essence of poetry, which in turn can be captured when the poet describes things "more intensely than the Things themselves ever dreamed of existing" (1989, p. 71). Betjeman achieves that intensity by bestowing a damned soul on Progress and accusing Time of being a thief.

Equally significant is Betjeman's "Hertfordshire" which conveys an anxiety to be detected throughout, which is that of a missing past. Betjeman, amid the rush of everyday life, was, as he says, oblivious of dear Hertfordshire. The poem, therefore, betrays a moment of awakening:

> I HAD forgotten Hertfordshire
> The large unwelcome fields of roots
> Where with my knickerbockered sire
> I trudged in syndicated shoots. (Guest, 1978, p. 161)

The expressed forgetfulness is, however, deceptive. It is fleeting and suggestive that readers also share this kind of temporary amnesia. Betjeman translates this kind of amnesia into a language of negligence and distraction, which replenishes the heart with details and the mind with new sensibility:

> And now I see these fields once more
> Clothed, thank the Lord, in summer green,
> Pale corn waves rippling to a shore
> The shadowy cliffs of elm between,
> They still are there. But now the shire
> Suffers a devastating change,
> Its gentle landscape strung with wire,
> Old places looking ill and strange. (Guest, 1978, p. 161)

The poet is struck to see 'a devastating change' creep into the gentle scenery infecting its healthy surrounding. The effect of modern industrialized life has been stretched to reach beyond the outskirts of London. A profound sense of premonition is central in Betjeman's Poetry:

> Betjeman was to emerge as the foremost literary champion of this nostalgic Englishness. In prose and poem, and in radio and television broadcasts, he portrayed an idyllic rural England of remote branch line railways, homely Women's Institutes, and ancient parish churches. England took him to heart ... But, just as his own 'Englishness' was in doubt, so this 'real' England was now under threat – from rapacious developers bent on pulling down the best of old England in the interests of making a quick profit, and from bureaucrats and centralists in 'Whitehall' who were complicit in this march of so called 'progress.' (Payton, 2010, p. xviii)

In "Hertfordshire," a public issue is dwelt upon, but once again locality is relevant to personal incidents. The poem, ultimately, is by no means an expression of a forgotten town but that of a tenacious memory:

> One can't be sure where London ends
> New towns have filled the fields of root
> Where father and his business friends
> Drove in the Lamluulette to shoot. (Guest, 1978, p. 162)

Betjeman has a keen perception of the world that belongs to the child. To recognize the value of his subject one should realize the embedded universal potentiality as his poems decode

communal awareness which is thinly veiled through his sincere interest in nature and childhood.

In his poem "A Lincolnshire Church" (1958), Betjeman shift from the thoughts about a sheer visit to an almost abandoned church into "the conjunction of social and spiritual" (Gardner, 2010, p. 155). His thoughts again are very similar to Rilke's poet who comes back from the hill with a different awareness that bespeaks a different community:

> And around it, turning their backs,
> The usual sprinkle of villas;
> The usual woman in slacks,
> Cigarette in her mouth,
> Regretting Americans, stands
> As a wireless croons in the kitchen
> Manicuring her hands.
> Dear old, bloody old England
> Of telegraph poles and tins,
> Seemingly so indifferent
> And with so little soul to win. (Guest, 1978, p. 170)

And yet hope continues to spring eternal, which is that of "renewal ... at community level ... the poet enters the church aiming to explore its architectural possibilities" but he is captivated by "its spiritual mystery" (Gardner, 2010, p. 156). In effect, he wants to translate into words that vigor which would have otherwise remained unintelligible to other visitors, readers and the community members of this church.

Betjeman executes his duty with no relaxed vigilance as he thrives to reach a mature response to a vanished way of life. He is not trying to poeticize his childhood but rather press poetry to a service of a need "aided by his awareness of the dangers of post-war urban redevelopment, which created an urgency that lent those traditional verse forms increasing poignancy, seeming, as they do, to critique their present via the poetics of the past" (Morse, 2008, p. 4).

4. Conclusion

Betjeman comes out as a translator in his attempt to get his readers across the barrier of time, to make them once more discern the spiritual Victorian regional beauty which they lost sight of. The overriding concern, in his poetry, is not sentimentality but commitment to the British provincial charms that had a great attraction to his poetry: "Instead of cultivating our feeling for mountain, lake, and stream, the poet has discovered and uncovered for us the attractions and sights of the ordinary town: the charm of railway stations, of non-conformist chapels, of parish churches, and Victorian houses" (Stanford, 1961, p. 72). His poems, thus, are eye-openers to a very appealing past. Betjeman did not quite share with his time the interest in modern issues. In fact, what other poets tried to leave behind catches up with him. He attempts to show a candle to the reader, that there are still many things to be restored in terms of places and buildings that, once the unsaid rises, would stand the test of time. These signs and signifiers, much to hi dissatisfaction, have been relegated to a secondary place. He eyed the future with distrust not in the sense of progress denial but for fear of drastic changes. It is the duty of the reader and the listener, he reckons, to recognize

the fountainheads of the old good times. Although Betjeman's poetry appears to so many readers as a celebration of Englishness, it is a commemoration and a commitment. What Betjeman attempts to translate to the modern scene is place and period because they are both subject to time and susceptible to erosion. His quest is not to immortalize or moralize but rather hope to import a living language whose images, visual objects and signs negate what has become foreign to the reader.

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