

THE RAGGLE TAGGLE GYPSIES

BY TONY BECKWITH



Tony Beckwith, a writer, translator, interpreter, poet, and cartoonist, is a regular contributor to Source.

Do great poets much enjoy translating the work of other poets? Yes and no. Seamus Heaney's spirited and acclaimed translation of Beowulf, published in 1999, made him feel like a man sentenced to hard labor, he later confessed. Now, three years after his death, we can read what he made of a fragment from Virgil's Aeneid, a work by an utterly different kind of maker. The Roman poet, in contrast with the unknown Anglo-Saxon who wrote Beowulf, is mellifluous and silver-tongued.¹

This introduction to a review of Heaney's *Aeneid: Book VI* caught my attention. I imagine he is not the only translator who ever felt he was doing hard time. What struck me was the reviewer's remark about the two poems—*Beowulf* and *The Aeneid*—being the work of utterly different makers. I wondered about each maker, drawing from his own well of experience, and about the books he might have read when he was young, the poets he recited, the kind of rhythms and melodies and

traditions he absorbed from his surroundings. All that experience is in the original poems, in word and tone, meter and rhythm.

My thoughts drifted to an earlier translation of Virgil's work by Robert Fitzgerald, considered by some to be the definitive version. Once again, we have a triangle, but instead of a translator and two poets, we have a poet and two translators. Now the translators are the makers, and each dips into his well of experience as he imports Virgil's Latin words into his mind and gradually sees them appear in English. Each comes up with his own version and, as always, it is interesting to see different renderings of certain words and phrases. I will quote just a few examples, to give a sense of the various shades of meaning that each translator found in the original.

Fitzgerald: Am I to see your face, my son, and hear our voices in communion as before?

Heaney: Am I now allowed to see your face, my son, and hear you talk, and talk to you myself?

Fitzgerald: My longing has not tricked me.

Heaney: My trust was not misplaced.

Fitzgerald: Might do you harm.

Heaney: Might be your undoing.

Fitzgerald: Three times the shade untouched slipped through his hands, weightless as wind and fugitive as dream.

Heaney: Three times the form, reached for in vain, escaped like a breeze between his hands, a dream on wings.

As always with translations of this quality, there is a triangulation effect that illuminates ambiguous terms in the original. Who knows what combination of experiences led to each translator's choices, to their particular variation on the poet's words? Wondering now about their background and influences makes me think about what any translator

brings to the task. Since we're talking about poetry, what poetic tradition filters our translation of a poem? In his poem "Ulysses," Tennyson said "I am a part of all that I have met." In their versions of *The Aeneid*, these two translators both make inspired choices as they transmute Virgil's Latin into English. In the examples quoted above, Fitzgerald's "voices in communion" rings true to my ear. I prefer Heaney's "My trust was not misplaced," and his "Might be your undoing" takes a broader view of a father's concern for his son. In the last example, I think Fitzgerald's "weightless as wind and fugitive as dream" does a better job of capturing the "song" of the original. My own poetic tradition no doubt influences these opinions, though precisely how that works I couldn't say.

Poetry is like truth; we grow up with or grow into certain styles that become our standard, what we regard as "true" poetry. Our truth is not necessarily true, of course, and it is certainly not universal, it is simply what we believe. The school I attended flooded my awareness with British poetry and songs, some of them validated by my British grandparents who heard echoes of the old country in those words and rhythms. The earliest song I can recall was about a rich man's wife who was either kidnapped by gypsies or ran away with them of her own free will. It was an old Anglo-Scottish folk song, a border ballad called "The Raggle Taggle Gypsies" and was sung to a haunting melody. It's the first song I remember that told a story. What moved me even more than the hint of scandal in the narrative was the rhythmic rattle of the chorus line, "She's away wi' the raggle taggle gypsy-o." The song had a lilting beat that captivated me, conveyed a seductive sense of danger, and made me want to run away with the gypsies. To this day I can barely speak the line without lapsing into song. I think of songs like this as being the midwives of my sense of rhythm.

In our literature classes at school (in the late 1950s) we were introduced to a group of British nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets. Although they were all different, their poems had clearly discernible structures and, in most cases, they rhymed. One of my early favorites was John Masefield (1878–1967),² specifically his poem

“Sea Fever.” I lived on the coast at that time, within the sound of the waves, and his poem seemed to express the myths and meanderings of a seafaring people:

*I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel’s kick and the wind’s song and the white sail’s shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea’s face, and a grey dawn breaking.*

I felt the rise and fall of the waves in the opening line of that verse, and the pull of the great beyond in the second. The other two lines had me on deck, my hands gripping the wheel, the sail fluttering above me as a clammy mist shrouded the break of dawn. Masfield showed me how words can create movement and make me feel the mist on my face.

G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936) intrigued me. He was the first poet who talked to me about politics and social problems. His poem “Lepanto,” written in 1911, is a hypnotic account of the Battle of Lepanto³ (1571):

*Dim drums throbbing, in the hills half heard,
Where only on a nameless throne a crownless prince has stirred,
Where, risen from a doubtful seat and half attained stall,
The last knight of Europe takes weapons from the wall,
The last and lingering troubadour to whom the bird has sung,
That once went singing southward when all the world was young.*

To my great good fortune, my English lit teacher was passionate about his calling. He explained the mechanics of what Chesterton was doing in that first line, introducing us to the power of poetic devices such as alliteration, the intoxicating effect of repetition, and the crucial importance of syllables.

Arthur J. Hobson taught us that heroic deeds were recorded for the ages in epic poems. Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) wrote his riveting masterpiece “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (1854) in response to the military disaster at the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War. Tennyson showed me that poetry can reflect national

traits, in this case the British sense of duty, as expressed in the terse, unsentimental line “Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die.”

Tennyson wrote many poems in blank verse, but most of the poets I grew up with wrote structured poems that rhymed. Sonnets, for example: three quatrains and a couplet create a perfectly balanced structure, so pleasing to the senses, in which to develop an idea. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) helped to revive the sonnet as a poetic form, and gave us a memorable opening line in Number 43 of her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850):

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.*

Sonnets have been around since the thirteenth century, and rhymed poetry for even longer. I can see how, long ago, before mankind learned how to write, words assembled in a particular order and structure would have created a container, in a sense, in which an idea could be carried from place to place. And rhyme gave the container a handle.

Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) was another poet whose work showed how words could (like Masefield’s mist) stimulate a physical reaction, as in her “In the Bleak Midwinter,” published posthumously in 1904, which was later set to music and became a Christmas carol:

*In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter
Long ago.*

These writers and others like them laid the groundwork for my poetic tradition. In time, naturally, I broadened my scope and read poems by many different kinds by poets from many different places. I have never lost my preference for structured, rhymed poetry, and on the whole agree with Robert Frost (1874–1963), who said that writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net. But there is, of course, plenty of unstructured, non-rhyming poetry that I enjoy at least partly because it has some of the rhythmic and melodic qualities I learned to appreciate when I was very young. When it comes to translating, the latter kind of poem is sometimes considered easier, since structure and rhyme add two more layers to the challenge. A familiarity with classically structured works might therefore be an asset when one is called upon to translate a structured, rhymed poem as distinct from one written in free verse.

I can look back and see roughly where poetry written in English has come from, and try to keep more or less current with what is being written by contemporary poets today. But where does poetry go from here? What kind of poetry will be written by the next generation, and the one after that? What poetic languages will they use? And what demands will future poetic and linguistic forms make upon translators? I feel modestly capable of translating poems written yesterday and today, but what about tomorrow? I see popular language changing around me every day as our communication is increasingly influenced and modified by digital technology. New words are introduced and old ones reinterpreted, acronyms are used as words, traditional syntax is transformed, poets experiment with every aspect of the language, and at some point (as we saw, to cite just one example, in “Jabberwocky,”⁴ Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem) these innovations will surely appear in poems. Am I ready to translate this kind of poetry? More broadly, am I equipped to translate these new forms of speech in any context?

It was this thought that led me to write a poem that incorporates some of the more commonly-used examples of this ‘new language’ as a way to explore how it works:

Like, A Foreign Film

They chatted on beside me,
as boys and girls will do,
and I'd love to tell you what I overheard.
But their speech was unfamiliar,
not your usual *parlez-vous*,
and I barely understood a single word:

He went *OMG*
and she was like *Whoa*
so he goes *Awesome*
and he's like *Totally*
but she's like *Get Out!*
and he goes *Huh?*
then he's like *No Way!*
but she goes *Way!*
then he's like *Forever?*
and she's like *Whatever*
so he goes *Bummer*
I hate for it to end

Then they lapsed into a silence
I could totally comprehend.

The italicized acronym and words are representative of expressions used in conversation and digital communication by a large sector of the population that tends to consist mainly, but by no means exclusively, of a younger demographic. They are phonetic symbols used to express a particular idea or feeling. The sentence structure reflects contemporary use of the word "like" to indicate a reaction, and the verb "to go" as an alternative to conventional use of "say," "reply," "indicate," and so on. The words (as used here) and the construction are new, but the ideas and feelings are not, and surely that is where tomorrow's translator will find inspiration.

The next step in this linguistic evolution involves emoticons⁵ and emojis⁶—symbols that seem closer to hieroglyphs than to the classic writing of twentieth-century poets—which create a whole new set of challenges for the translator. The emoticon is, after all, a graphic icon used to convey an emotion that knows no language barrier, offering a tantalizing glimpse of a time when a pool of icons might be available to those who wish to construct poems addressed to mankind as a whole rather than to those who speak the same language. A truly universal symbol-based language seems a little remote at this stage, however, especially since not all images mean the same thing to everyone, so presumably the poetry translator’s career is not in immediate jeopardy.

I have not yet seen a poem that uses emoticons in the text, but when I do I will know that I have come as far as I will ever get from the poets I was weaned on, and am standing on the border between what I might call their era and the future. I will probably think of William Wordsworth (1770–1850), whose “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” —were it written today—could quite easily be festooned with emoticons of clouds and flowers to replace some or all of the words:

*I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils*

Wordsworth said “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” We have largely taken for granted that such overflows are expressed in recognizable words. Are we on the brink of something new? And, if so, how will that affect what we translators do? People say poetry is hard to translate. Some say it can’t be done. I think it all depends—as it has always done—on the poem and on the translator’s well of experience.

NOTES

- 1 "Seamus Heaney's *Aeneid*: Music from the underworld." *The Economist*, 16 April 2016. A review of Seamus Heaney's *Aeneid: Book VI* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016). <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21696919-music-underworld>
- 2 John Masefield was Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom from 1930 until his death in 1967.
- 3 The Battle of Lepanto (1571), in which the Ottoman fleet was defeated by the Christian crusader Don John of Austria. Cervantes was in the service of the Spanish Navy at the time, and fought in the battle, where he was wounded and lost the use of his left arm, which earned him the nickname "el manco de Lepanto" (the one-armed man of Lepanto).
- 4 "Jabberwocky" was part of *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, the 1871 novel by Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), a sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.
- 5 An emoticon (a hybrid of *emotion* and *icon*) is "a pictorial representation of a facial expression using punctuation marks, numbers and letters," written on a computer keyboard "to express a person's feelings or mood." From Wikipedia.
- 6 Emojis are pictures of many different kinds, available online to be added to text that is sent electronically.