Poetry Translation Depends on the Translator’s Purpose:

An Interview with Ian Mason about Poetry Translation and Translation Studies

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During his visiting journey in Sichuan University (SCU) from Oct 27 to Nov 4, 2010, the author interviewed him about some questions on poetry translation and Translation Studies (TS) with an aim to investigate the above two issues from other’s perspectives. The whole interview was done through emails in which the author put forward questions and Prof. Mason answered one by one despite his busy arrangement on lectures. He gave careful responses to every question at the cost of his break time. It should be mentioned that Prof. Mason gave a cautious and patient response within his understanding on poetry translation and TS, which manifests his sincerity and strictness on academic research. The following are the talks between us. (Mason abbreviated as M)

Q1. Today, I have some questions to ask you about poetry translation. Maybe, it is beyond the domain of your academic research, but I don’t think so. Let’s come to the point. I have noticed that you have dedicated to the pragmatics on translation studies from your first co-authored work, the Discourse and Translator (1990) to now. Then, my question is, when a translator faces a piece of poem, whether it is a sign or a discourse or a text in his eyes? And what first role of the translator is when he translates a piece of poem in your opinion? To transfer the meaning, intended meaning, rhythm, rhyme, style or all of them?

M: When a translator faces a poem, he/she has in mind a purpose for a translation. Either the translator has been commissioned by a publisher to provide, say, a new translation, or a parallel-text translation or a prose translation or a popularizing version; or the translator takes such decisions by him/herself. Given that you can’t do it all, you make choices. And different readers will prefer different kinds of translation.

Q2. Walter Benjamin ever said “no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” in his work of The Task of Translator. (Benjamin, 2000:15) If this is taken for granted, then the translator is no more necessary, how do you comment on this remark? And to what extent does the pragmatics or conversation analysis have an effect in the translating of a poem?

M: If Benjamin said this, I don’t agree with him! Do poets not go and talk to publishers? Do musicians not become recording artists? The only case I would allow is where a poet composes a poem and then destroys it: that, clearly, is not intended for public consumption. Poets, musicians, etc. do indeed seek only to
express their own innermost feelings but they are bound to be aware of others who will experience their creations. Thus they become audience conscious.

Pragmatics/conversation analysis: this is surely a completely separate question? CA is intended for the analysis of spontaneous spoken dialogue only so would be inappropriate for a poem. Pragmatics? Yes, of course, given that poetry deals with inexplicit meanings.

Q3. If it is true, it will reject the communicative meaning of the poem. But as a conveyance of thoughts, spirit, life experience, writing style of a poet, even the exotic poetics, what aspects of a poem should be translated in your opinion?
M: See answer to Qu. 1 above: it depends on the translator’s purpose.

Q4. In the above two questions, you emphasized the translator’s purpose, which seems to determine the translating strategy of a translator. Then, I wonder whether this will lead to an arbitrary rewriting on the original text, or violating the ethics of a translator, that is to say, be faithful to the original author and original text?
M: I think the ethics of the translator are to be faithful to what they say they will do. In the history of poetry translation, there are many poet-translators who have explained, in a preface, that they are taking the ST as an inspiration to write a (new) poem in the TL. If this is what they aim to do, and if they are honest about it to their readers, then a (very) free translation is ethical. And translating-for- a-specified-purpose is the opposite of “arbitrary”: it is directed towards a clear goal. Arbitrary translating occurs when the translator has no clear idea of what kind of translation they want to achieve (since no single translation can do it all: faithful to rhyme, faithful to metre, faithful to semantic sense, faithful to intended sense, faithful to sonority, etc.).

Q5. According to Prof. Cao Minglun, the purpose of a translator can be classified into two groups: textual-purpose and non-textual purpose, and the behavior of a translator into textual-behavior and non-textual behavior. (Cao, Minglun, 2007: 147-151) My question is, how do you comment it in the aspect of poetry translation according to your understanding?
M: I have never done poetry translating in my life so I can’t comment on that aspect. But I agree with Prof. Cao that there is textual purpose and non-textual purpose. (just as the face-to-face interpreter has a translational purpose and an
exchange management purpose: the translator has to represent a ST in the TL and has to consider what is to happen to the TT: where is it destined to go? Who will read it? How will they react? etc.)

Q6. But according to your interest, the reader’s response, I’d like to know that to what extent the reader’s response will affect the translator’s translating a poem?

M: The translator would only know about reader response via press reviews of earlier translations. Otherwise it’s difficult for him/her to know what the reader thinks: very few would bother to let him/her know directly. It’s probably the publisher who would have a greater influence. If the publisher wants a translation to stand alongside the original as an aid for the reader to understand the original, then the translator will probably want to be literal. If the publisher wants a set of poems, the translator (if a poet) will probably use the ST as a stimulus and try to be creative.

Q7. In Qu. 4, you overstressed the external factors influencing the translating of a translator such as the publisher. But as I know, some poetry translators said that they translated according to their understandings of the original text. I am puzzled a little bit: to what extent a translator is autonomous during his translating a poetry or a text?

M: “Overstress” means “stress too much”. Actually, I don’t think I stressed it too much—but maybe you just meant “stressed”? If the translator is working for him/herself, they have complete autonomy: they can do whatever they like—from extremely literal word-for-word translating to free adaptation. But if a SL poet has asked the translator to translate his/her works, then the translator is likely to discuss with the author what kind of translation they want. If the translator has been commissioned by a publisher to produce the translations, then the publisher can say what they want done (though some publishers would leave it to the translator to decide). Finally, if the translator decides to translate first and then seek a publisher, again he/she enjoys complete freedom BUT the resulting translation may not be to the liking of all publishers.

To be clear: I have read several translations of the work of the French 19th century poet Rimbaud\([1]\). One is a plain prose translation appearing underneath the French text of each poem (published by Penguin Books). The publisher has obviously commissioned the translator to give a close rendition of the semantic
sense of the text (only). But Robert Lowell[2] published a set of translations of Rimbaud in which he told the reader (in a Preface) that the TL poems were his own, based on Rimbaud. Finally, I have seen other translations which sought to reflect Rimbaud’s musicality/sonority/poetics in a verse translation.

Q8. Some say a poem should be translated by a poet so as to keep the style of the original text. On the other hand, some say a poem should be translated by a native translator of the target language. Obviously, these two questions relate to the issue of the identity of a translator. So what kind of identity should be held for a translator when he or she translates a poem?

M: Again, it’s the same answer. It depends on what kind of translation is required. A TL native poet would probably be best for creating a TL poem based on the ST. But a non-native expert on SL poetry could give a very good interlinear prose version. Different translations/translators for different purposes.

Q9. Relevance theory is a very important theory for grasping the meaning of a word or text in a concrete context. Apart from this aspect, what kind of role it will play in the translation of a poem?

M: Maybe only in allowing the translator to make judgements about what (range of) meanings a TL reader is likely to retrieve from the poem (that is, assuming that the reader opts for the meanings which offer maximum cognitive effect for minimum processing effort).

Q10. Francis T. Palgrave ever said in the preface of his Golden Treasury (1875) that “popular estimate is serviceable as a guide-post more than as a compass; above all, that excellence should be looked for rather in the whole than in the parts”. How do you comment on his viewpoint about poetry translation and its reception in a target culture?

M: I don’t have a view about this—except to say that a lot of experts seem to want to dictate to the rest of us what “should be” done. Why should excellence be looked for in the whole rather than the parts? I need to be persuaded.

Q11. Some say translating a poem is nothing but a word-play, do you think so?

M: No. Word-play is a superficial aspect of poetry, which is about emotion, aesthetics and expression.
Q12. Pragmatics is a useful discipline to seek the implicature of the original author. Therefore, some claimed that a poetry translator should dig out and explain the real signified for the reader. But others don't agree this viewpoint because they argue that a poem is similar to a riddle which is just the charm of one poem, leaving the blank for the reader's own assumption. And some say fluency is the first of all principle for a poetry translator rather than the faithfulness and elegance. How do you comment on these remarks according to your viewpoint?

M: I would agree with Robert de Beaugrande[^3] *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translating* (1978) that poems offer a range of meanings and that therefore a good translation is one which makes this range available to the reader and does not seek to impose one single reading (the translator's) on the reader.

Q13. Then let us turn to the specific question from the theoretical discussion, taking Robert Frost's poem as an example. Though he was an American poet, he was firstly well-known in UK and inherited the tradition of English poetry. How do you like his poem? If possible, could you give us some comments on his poem and tips on its translation?

M: I have no views on Robert Frost's poems, being only slightly aware of them. I have never studies English literature (only French literature).

Q14. As the language of a poem is always metaphoric and meaningful, some say we can deconstruct its meaning only if it was rational. But the others don't agree with this viewpoint, they argue that there is only a meaning approaching to the real intention of the author. So, which one would you like to prefer? As a translator of a poem, is it necessary to grasp the real intention of a poem?

M: If you have followed my lectures this week, you would have already known the answer to this one. It is never possible to assert with confidence what the real intention or intended meaning of the author is because we do not have access to each other's brains. This is why I invoked the notions of "text-world models". At best we can try not to reduce the meaning potential of a poem.

Q15. In all the forms of literary translation, maybe the poetry translation is the least influenced by the power or ideology. It is just the intervention of ideology that may make a poem popular though sometimes it may be put down for a period. Can
we say that, to some extent, the ideology plays a role of two-edged sword in the proliferation of a literary work or a poem in a target culture? Or it is just the least intervention that makes the poetry translation less read than other forms of other literary works.

M: Sorry, I don’t quite understand this question. What is the two-edged sword? NB that for me ideology is a set of assumptions, beliefs, values shared by social groups and all texts carry ideology. So all poems are ideological in some way.

Q16. According to your answers, I find a tendency that you Western scholars of Translation Studies incline to analyze the translation and translator’s behavior in a broad social background but overlook the status of the original work. Is it an instrumental viewpoint that takes the translation as rather than an independent discipline? But Susan Bassnett stated in 1980s that Translation Studies, as an independent discipline, had been founded. How do you comment on the state quos of the Translation Studies both in China and West?

M: That’s lots of VERY BIG questions rolled into one! I can’t do justice to all this. It would take several days. First, do not assume that Western translation scholars all agree with each other. Personally, I think that the centre of debate in the West has moved too far away from the actual activity of translating towards ever-more-remote contextual issues. But that’s just my opinion. I don’t think TS is yet a discipline because it has not yet agreed on (1) the object of its study (i.e. what is translation?) and (2) on its methods. I thought we were getting close when Gideon Toury propounded Descriptive Translation Studies but now people have reverted to moralising prescriptivism (e.g. certain post-colonial studies). Finally, I believe the status of the original work is VERY important but it is never the only consideration.

Q17. Some Chinese scholars, for example, Lv Jun and Hou, Xiangqun put forward a new theory of Constructivist to reshape the chaotic state quos of Translation Studies that over stresses the external factors of translation in their co-authored book Translatology: A Constructivist Perspective of Translation Study based on the communication theory of Habermas with an aim to construct a better research scheme for TS. How do you comment on their ideas?

M: Sorry, I am not acquainted with their ideas. It may be a very important new theory but (through my fault alone) I do not have access to it.
Q18. The last question. How do you comment on the future of poetry translation from the perspective of your own research interest?

M: I am not qualified to say. I guess to some extent the future of poetry translation depends on the future of poetry. In my country, for example, the number of people who read poems is diminishing all the time. I wish it were not so, but it is.

It should be noted that Prof. Mason modestly claimed he know nothing about poetry translation. But after communicating with him through the explanation on the purpose of this interview, Prof. Mason readily accepted this invitation and made his attempt to answer my questions according to his understanding on the poetry and discipline of Translation Studies, which is appreciated by the author. It is just the author’s expectation that the other’s viewpoint to look at the poetry translation will provide some tips for the insiders within the poetry translation and Translation Studies. Of course, answers of Prof. Mason in the interview are merely his independent thought about poetry translation and Translation Studies. The author also expects that reactions will be aroused on the topics of poetry translation and Translation Studies, through which to promote the development of poetry translation and Translation Studies.

Notes:

[1] Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) was a French poet. Born in Charleville, Ardennes, he produced his best known works while still in his late teens—Victor Hugo described him at the time as “an infant Shakespeare”—and gave up creative writing altogether before the age of 21.

[2] Robert Lowell (1917-1977) was an American poet, considered as the founder of the confessional poetry movement. He was appointed the sixth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress where he served from 1947 until 1948. He won the Pulitzer Prize in both 1947 and 1974 and the National Book Award in 1960.

[3] Robert-Alain de Beaugrande (1946-June 2008) was a text linguist and discourse analyst, one of the leading figures of the Continental tradition in the discipline. He was one of the developers of the Vienna School of text linguistics, and published the seminal Introduction to Text Linguistics in 1981, with Wolfgang U. Dressler. He was also a major figure in the consolidation of critical discourse analysis.
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