

William Scott  
University of Pittsburgh

### Modernism in Translation

When I was asked to contribute to a panel exploring the use of translated texts in the undergraduate literature curriculum, I immediately remembered a question that was put to me by a student in an upper-level undergraduate English course I taught at the University of Pittsburgh in the spring of 2007 called “The Modernist Tradition.” This course was designed to introduce students to a broad range of modernist movements and schools, spanning roughly one-hundred years, from 1850 to 1950. I wanted to shift the focus of a modernist survey away from the standard, relatively narrow selection of British and American authors who are frequently taken to be its most significant representatives, such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Virginia Woolf, and to consider the work of French, Italian, and German modernists alongside these more familiar figures. However, to do so would require supplying the students with all the texts for the course myself, since there is currently no English-language anthology of international modernist literature. This also meant that I would need to find, choose, and teach (and sometimes personally correct) English translations of texts that were originally written in French, Italian, and German. Some of these translations I considered to be “reliable”—that is, close approximations, both literally and figurally, of the originals—whereas others, often the only translations I could find, were more problematic. When using these latter, generally freer translations, I pointed out to students where and how they differed from the original texts. In addition, I frequently included copies of the original texts alongside their English versions to enable students who had some knowledge of foreign languages to benefit from comparative readings.

About three weeks into the semester, a student in the course e-mailed me a question about

our use of texts in translation. She was especially interested in the process by which poetry gets translated, and she asked me how it was possible for a translator to preserve the original poem's rhyme scheme while staying faithful to its meaning. Wouldn't the effort to approximate one of these, she wondered, require sacrificing the other? In my reply, I described to her how some translations were more "successful" than others, and I explained my criteria for deciding which of these versions would be used in the course. I also pointed out that many of the authors we were reading during the semester, such as Baudelaire, Pound, and Benjamin, were also distinguished for their work as translators, and that, in fact, some of our translated texts were made by British and American authors we would later be studying. Indeed, what we were calling the modernist "tradition" was in large part a product of the efforts of these writers to translate and disseminate each other's works.

Yet while I discussed these points with the student, on reflection, I found that I was adopting a somewhat apologetic position, along the lines of "I really wish it didn't have to be this way, but, unfortunately, this is the best we can do." In other words, I felt as though I was confessing to her that my internationalist version of the "modernist tradition," two-thirds of which was focused on foreign language writers, was subtly cheating her out of a more authentic encounter with modernist literature in its original form, as well as depriving her of a more thorough acquaintance with Anglo-American modernists. Although the course was introducing her to a variety of new authors she had never heard of, it could only do so, I suspected, by repeatedly frustrating what I took to be her desire and expectation to encounter the "real thing." Perhaps she and the rest of the students in the course would only feel like they were taking a "real" English course when we came to the last third of the semester, which emphasized

Anglo-American schools of modernism, and that, in the meantime, all the attention we were paying to these translated—and thus in some sense phony, spectral, or castrated—texts was simply a waste of their time and tuition fees.

Fortunately, my assumption that the students in the course were disappointed by the fact that they were reading texts in translation proved to be mistaken. As I was to discover, despite the fact that we often relied on translations, this did not trouble students as much as I thought it would. On the contrary, they all expressed particular enthusiasm for the course's eclectic and wide-ranging curriculum. None of them, in the end, complained that I was teaching them (what I was afraid they would see as) “phony” versions of literary works. This individual student, for example, did not feel that she was being cheated out of an English course. Her question about how a translated poem preserves the rhyme scheme of the original simply reflected her curiosity about the actual practice of translation.

However, the more I thought about the tone of my response to her question (“sorry, but this is the best we can do...”), the more I wondered why I had tried to compensate for the presumed inadequacy of the texts by reassuring her that “...it's okay, because these writers were also translating one another.” How, I asked myself, could an awareness of this have made up for the fact that we were reading translations—and potentially bad ones at that—of original texts? What were students to gain by my pointing out to them the dynamic intertextuality of the modernist tradition? And why, ultimately, did I imagine that the notion of intertextuality would deflect, or at least rechannel, students' concerns over the problem of using texts in translation?

Although I never explicitly addressed these specific questions in the classroom, my struggle to come to terms with them led me to draw my own and my students' attention to

various acts of translation in the modernist tradition itself. On the one hand, “acts of translation” involved the practical problem of translating texts from one language into another. When appropriate, I would indicate to students what we were “losing” (or occasionally gaining) in the translated texts we read. In other instances I would help them to translate phrases or passages that the translator, or English-language writers such as Pound and Eliot, had decided to leave in the original language. On the other hand, “acts of translation” took on a much broader sense when used to refer to aesthetic, historical, and cognitive aspects of modernist art and literature. The term “translation” could therefore be used to describe acts of transposition from one formal medium into another, overlapping frames of reference and perspectives, correlations between historical periods, and shifts in states of consciousness (understood either phenomenologically or experientially).

By regularly invoking both of these senses—where “translation” is associated with a practical problem as well as implying a set of conceptual motifs—I tried to convert what initially appeared to be a problem lurking at the margins of the course into a productive theme of the course itself. I found, for example, that I was more and more frequently defining the “tradition” of modernism for my students as though it were simply an amalgamation of these various (literal and figural) acts of translation. The tradition, in other words, could be reconceptualized as a kind of translation, or more precisely, as a series of deliberate (and more or less successful) acts of translation between different formal media, languages, historical periods, and states of consciousness. In this manner—spurred by my initial effort to respond to the student’s question about translating poetry—the goal of the course eventually changed from the usual primary purpose of a literary “survey” (coverage for the sake of coverage) towards having a more explicit

focus on the motif of translation. As a result, the survey of the modernist tradition had become, at least in this case, a survey of modernist forms of translation, designed to explore the multiple senses of this concept by way of the artists, writers, and movements we were studying.

Even as a practical concern, where translation poses relatively basic problems of legibility and understanding, I tried to reformulate the question of translation to make of it an enabling and productive issue instead of simply an unavoidable flaw of the course materials. For instance, in our discussion of Arthur Rimbaud's collection of prose and poetry, *A Season in Hell*, the English version we were using (which was otherwise excellent) translated Rimbaud's famous dictum, "Il faut être absolument moderne," as "One must be absolutely up to date." After I clarified this slight but significant change for the students we speculated together over the issue of why the translator thought it more appropriate to use "up to date" instead of the English cognate "modern" in rendering Rimbaud's prose. This discussion in turn allowed us once again to explore the meaning of the notions of modernity and "the modern" in light of the somewhat different understandings of these terms which were articulated by Rimbaud's immediate predecessors, such as Whitman, Baudelaire, and Flaubert.

In the case of texts that were translated into English, but which retained certain words from the original language, these sometimes provided an occasion to discuss the materiality of language itself—that is, language's phonetic and syntactic qualities, and the integral relation these bear to its presumably independent semantic properties. Not only was this discussion valuable in its own right, but it was useful pedagogically as well, since it pertained to a wide range of modernist writers who consciously experimented with the material aspects of their respective languages. For instance, when we studied Stéphane Mallarmé's essay "Crisis in

Poetry,” Mallarmé at one point observes: “When compared to the opacity of the word ombre, the word ténèbres does not seem very dark; and how frustrating the perverseness and contradiction which lend dark tones to jour, bright tones to nuit!” In our discussion of this passage, we talked first about why the translator chose to leave the original French words intact in the English version of the text. But this conversation led directly to a broader discussion of the importance of sound and color for a writer such as Mallarmé, and indeed for the Symbolist movement as a whole. The fact that Mallarmé here analyzes language’s aural and visual properties (tones and shades) in relation to its semantic function once more raised the question of translation, only this time with respect to the linguistic translatability of material forms. Such a brief passage, then—precisely because it was not fully and literally translated into English—served all the better to fulfill a pedagogical goal, for it clearly illustrated one of the key problematics underlying Symbolist and Decadent aesthetics (among other schools of modernism): namely, how to translate the sensory perception of colors, sounds, and images into language, and vice versa.

To introduce students to the modernist school of “Unanimism” we studied Ezra Pound’s 1918 translation of an essay by Jules Romains, entitled “Reflexions.” At the end of the essay Pound appends a short “Note,” which he begins with the remark, “It is of course wholly ridiculous that I should leave off my work to make translations.” Although Pound characterizes the work involved in translating Romains’s text as a “simple labor of importation,” he goes on to assert that “My brief excerpt from Romains gives the tone of his thought.” Here again, the example of one modernist translating another afforded us the opportunity to ask what, according to Pound, might be involved in rendering the “tone” of Romains’s thought. Rather than speak

of the semantic sense of the original text here, Pound—whose understanding of translation resembles Mallarmé’s in this regard—defines the aim of the importer-translator as the attempt to convey any number of possible “tones” associated with the act of thinking. More generally, the notion that thought is made up of a palette of shades and hues, or a range of frequencies (which, while being aesthetically imperceptible, could still be preserved from one language to the next), reflects a principle that was common to many different, and otherwise quite distinct, modernist aesthetic programs.

As one final illustration of how the issue of translation made itself felt as a practical problem in the course, my students felt justifiably overwhelmed by the linguistic complexity of Pound’s lengthy poem of 1920, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly (Contacts and Life).” I framed our discussion of this poem by first asking the students to approach it, at least at the formal level, as a series of experiments designed to explore questions of translation, translatability, and linguistic difference. From such a vantage point, I hoped, Pound’s carefully orchestrated shifts of characterization and narrative point of view would be more fully legible. The fifteenth stanza of the poem offers a typical example of the linguistic play that can be found in virtually every one of its lines:

O bright Apollo,  
 τίςζ ἄνδρα, τίςρ ...ρωα, τίνα Θεόν,  
 What god, man, or hero  
 Shall I place a tin wreath upon!

Our first order of business was to translate the second line of the stanza, which is an excerpt from Pindar’s Olympian Odes written in classical Greek—“τίςζ ἄνδρα, τίςρ ...ρωα, τίνα Θεόν”—into

“You man, you hero, you god.” Once having done this, it was clear to the students that Pound was offering something of his own translation of the Greek in the following line, “What god, man, or hero.” Yet, significantly, it was also evident that Pound, in providing his own translation, was also revising the original text. Pound changes the order of the original Greek terms so that the series “man, hero, and god” becomes “god, man, and hero.” Further, for the substantive pronoun in the second person, “you,” Pound substitutes the interrogative pronoun “what” (which may also be read adjectivally). I then pointed out to students that a standard English translation of the Greek renders it as “Which man, which hero, which God.” The fact that Pound as well as other translators converted the substantive pronoun “you” into the interrogative pronoun “what/which” raises a question over the addressee of the exclamation. When “you” is turned into “what” or “which,” the speaker may be understood as making a reflexive statement, asking a question that pertains only to his own private dilemma of where to place a wreath. But if the substantive meaning of the pronoun is preserved, the speaker would have to be read as addressing the god, “O bright Apollo,” which, in fact, is clearly suggested by the first line of Pound’s stanza.

Thus what initially appears to be an instance of Pound simply translating Pindar—and, in the process, following a standard (but not literal) English translation of the Greek—turns out to reveal more complex possibilities for interpretation. That is, Pound’s speaker in this stanza appears to be addressing “bright Apollo” in Pindar’s original language, and to do so by citing the very form of address that Pindar had assigned to his own speaker. Is Pound’s speaker, then, addressing Apollo, Pindar, or both at once? Or might Pound’s speaker be addressing Apollo directly as if he were himself Pindar (or Pindar’s speaker)—that is, under the assumed guise of

another poet? The stanza allows for the possibility that any or all of these readings may be considered simultaneously, although each reading would lend a slightly different sense to the stanza as a whole.

Most important, however, is the fact that Pound produces this polysemic scenario by way of embedding and foregrounding acts of translation within the poem itself. My students' initial response to the poem was to feel turned off by what they saw as Pound simply showing off his facility with foreign languages. It struck them as being nothing more than an expression of Pound's legendary elitism, his "lording" his knowledge of classical Greek over them. Yet once I translated the Greek for them (making sure to indicate that Pound translates it as well) and we began to analyze the variety of potential points of view that were being evoked here, their sense of Pound's project expanded considerably. They already knew (from the Jules Romains text) that Pound was active as a translator throughout his career, but until now they had assumed that he would have assigned this kind of work a secondary status in relation to his primary literary pursuits. Besides, had not Pound himself referred to his translation of Romains as a "simple labor of importation," admitting that "It is of course wholly ridiculous that I should leave off my work to make translations"? Yet in the case of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" it is obvious that this "labor" of importation is not so simple after all. For the question arises here of whether Pound is importing the figure of Pindar, the poet, or rather that of Pindar's speaker, into his text, or whether Pound cites Pindar only in order to import the figure of Apollo, or to import merely a Pindarian form of address to the god. In short, Pound's apparently straightforward "use" of translation here is no longer strictly identical to itself, since it can be read as both a translation and as something else entirely: namely, a translation and a citation of the act of translation at one

and the same time. Consequently, Pound's translation-as-citation—which is equally a citation-as-translation—may no longer be understood as a form of work entirely distinct from the labor of writing poetry, in spite of Pound's statements to the contrary. Our exploring this idea through a formal analysis of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,” in turn, proved enormously helpful for students when they studied selections from Pound's Cantos later in the semester.

In closing, I would like to mention one last thing about this stanza: “O bright Apollo, / τίς ἄνδρα, τίς ἄνθρωπα, τίς θεόν, / What god, man, or hero / Shall I place a tin wreath upon!” After we had discussed several of the interpretative possibilities implied here, I pointed out to my students how Pound was also using the Greek original to exploit the homophonic elements of the phrases “τίς ἄνθρωπα, τίς θεόν” and “a tin wreath upon.” The students found Pound's bilingual pun not only amusing and endearing in its own right, but its revelation of a sense of humor (particularly where they were not expecting to find one) helped further to disarm their initial resistance to the density of Pound's style. Their increased openness to Pound meant that we could now explore a new set of questions associated with modernist acts of translation, such as, “Is a homophonic pun a kind of translation?—If so, what exactly is it translating?”; and “Can the materiality of language, independently of its sense, be translated, or only echoed?”; and “Do material echoes convey meanings of their own independently of words' semantic properties, or, rather, is the materiality of language inextricably linked to its semantic function”? Of course, these questions brought us back to the now familiar issues of translation and transposition among authors and artists that we had already encountered, such as Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Picasso, Cendrars, Marinetti, and Apollinaire, but they also prepared the way for our study of Eliot, Ford, Brecht, Stein, Woolf, H.D., Williams, Hughes, Loy, Stevens, and the rest of the so-called

“modernist tradition”—a course title which, uncannily, was beginning to sound more and more like its distant homophonic cousin, the “modernist translation.”