

An interview with Robert Sheppard

by Anamaría Crowe Serrano

For someone who is not a translator, what was the attraction of writing poems as if they were translations?

I think, for me, there are two aspects to this. The reason I'm not a translator is that I don't possess linguistic competence of a high enough level in another language to accomplish translations (though I've had a go at 'versions', of Baudelaire, Mandelstam, Li Shang-yin, quite a different thing). And I'm slightly envious of those who do. My colleague Daniele Pantano has recently been busily thrashing through the undergrowth of Georg Trakl, day by day, and it must be poetically satisfying to be able to create poems that are equivalents of other poems that do not themselves 'wobble' (as Ezra Pound put it) because they are fixed and finished while the translational process hovers about them, as it were, unfixed and unfinished. You don't have to go searching for the next poem.

Secondly, fictional translations are special cases of fictional poems, which is something that has obsessed me for a while (since the comedic and satirical Wayne Pratt and Justin Sidebottom poems in *Twentieth Century Blues* at least). There are fragments of fictional poems in the three short stories collected in *The Only Life*: alternative Keats, an amateur poet in Yorkshire and the Czech Esperanto poet Tropp. 'Tropp' is almost a dry-run for *A Translated Man*. I'm much taken by this description, though I read it as a possible definition, by Gerald L. Bruns:

To be sure, the difference between a poem in a novel and a poem in an anthology is apt to be empirically indiscernible. To speak strictly, a fictional poem would be a poem held in place less by literary history than by one of the categories that the logical world keeps in supply: conceptual models, possible worlds, speculative systems, hypothetical constructions in all their infinite variation – or maybe just whatever finds itself caught between quotation marks, as (what we call) 'reality' often is.

I like that sense of creating a poem that has no context, no biography – it's a conceptual entity, a speculative instrument, a bit of a tease. This is why it is different (for me) from persona poems, even Pessoa's brilliant heteronyms: for me their poems always seem like dramatisations of a personality. Real poets write poems that don't look like their own poems – and for me that's almost a cornerstone. I hope the poems in *A Translated Man* don't particularly look like 'Sheppard' poems (they often felt very alien to write, though not always I'll admit). I favour a poetics of multiform unfinish in any case. For me the combination of fictional poems, double *oeuvres*, multiple translations and the possibility that one of my creatures (at least) is not telling the whole truth, makes *A Translated Man* a crucible of 'hypothetical constructions in all their infinite variation'.

What you say about real poets writing poems that don't look like their own poems is very interesting. It's what you always aim for, of course, and have written about in your own work: continuously trying to translate yourself out of yourself into some unexplored transwording of yourself. But in A Translated Man you multiply the challenge of reinventing yourself by having the 'translator' deal with two psychological and cultural aspects of René Van Valckenborch: his Flemish self, and his Walloon self. You've been very successful in giving Van Valckenborch his double identity by creating poems that are structurally and thematically quite different for each language. You must have had some notion of who

this author was, some kind of context or imagined biography, however conceptual. Who is Van Valckenborch when he writes in Flemish, and who is he when he writes in Walloon?

Weirdly, no, I didn't plot him out as a person. He was (is) a question, a split author-function, and I only built him poem by poem. I didn't furnish a biography, even to myself. I find that rather odd now, but it kept him mobile as to his interests. The 'biographical' references to childhood holidays at Ostende or the beach at Knokke, the repeated description of Ghent as 'where I have never lived', don't take us far. He is an enigma to the two translators and editor, who seem to have more solidity than he has (and they can't locate him, literally or culturally). The thumbnail I used for his 'twitterodes' (www.twitter.com/#!/VanValckenborch) is a photograph of an empty window in Antwerp.

In any case, I made Van Valckenborch (much in the light of one of my other intellectual interests) by creating two distinct *poetics* out of fragments of my own, bringing to the fore ideas abandoned or half-entertained, or other people's, to see how they could be pushed – rather wilfully, from behind, like a donkey – to work in these new contexts. That would be the conceptual biography of a *poet* in some ways, wouldn't it?

Since you mention poetics, did approaching A Translated Man from the perspective of a translation, with the underlying artifice, reconstruction and constraints that translation implies, inform the poems in ways you wouldn't have otherwise thought of?

I was aware of saying something different by being someone different, by adopting contrived poetics, but that could be achieved without the artifice of translation. I wasn't playing with fictional translation so much as fictional poems. In fact, I was aware that some of the verbal tricks (say the alliterative run of 'shonman shaman/ sham & shameless hero/ shapeshifter shoplifter' in 'from masks') are hinting rather loudly that this is *not* a translation. Perhaps it has been written by one or two of the 'translators' directly into English, though this is refuted by the 'editor' in his introduction, though he is clearly an unreliable narrator. One aspect – it's not artifice really – that I borrow from my experience of reading poetry in translation is the sense of its incompleteness, that there might be a limited number of translations in existence and they get spread around anthologies and you keep finding them again when you desperately want fresh ones. In the Walloon poems there are a number of supposedly excerpted sequences (like 'from masks' for example) and we are left asking: what is the missing poem 2 like between 1 and 3? Is number 20 actually the end of the sequence? On the Flemish side there is a reference to a complete book that isn't represented in the 'selection'. I like that tease. I know that's not quite what you mean but I think it's an effect arising from the contingencies of translation.

Where I think the artifices are revealed more is in another incomplete sequence, Flemish version Van Valckenborch's own fictional translations, his construction of the EUOLA, the 'European Union of Imaginary Authors'. That involved trying to give the sense of an author with one short lyric. The book gives 5 quite various poems by an Austrian, a Lithuanian, etc. But there are 22 missing, if we are to believe that there is one per member of the EU. Unlike 'masks' where it is deliberately incomplete, the EUOLA was sketched out more fully and then abandoned, but not before I'd put some of it online. See <http://euoia.weebly.com/index.html>. I have some plans to come back to this contrivance as a collaborative project. Zoë Skoulding and I have written two poems by Gurkan Arnuvut so far. One of the more arch conceits is that Van Valckenborch invents *me* – but that's deliberately not in *A Translated Man*, where I like to leave loose ends, but I also aimed to make it a watertight fictional world.

The verbal tricks are definitely a prod at every translator out there and, paradoxically, they defy translation. Is that deliberate? Would you be happy to see your work translated even if it meant watering down, or even completely omitting something as important as the artifice you so carefully construct?

It's a truism that poetry is what is lost in translation, and you take it on trust, perhaps trust of a known translator. It's a curious experience to read a translation from a language that you don't read or have access to the originals. You have to treat it as a poem in English. The latter is part of the 'prodding' of *A Translated Man*.

Oddly, no poem of mine has ever been translated (by a human; I've used machine translators jokily outside of the project). I've never experienced what I imagine is an uncanny sense of recognition and displacement. I would have to trust the translator to make the necessary decisions of what artifice would be lost in exchange for verbal coherence in the target language. Or I would accept that translation might involve making analogous moves in another language to approximate the artifice. (I'm not thinking of 'versioning' or devices like homophonic translations.) Unfortunately I have no concrete examples. But in *A Translated Man*, particularly through the 'translator' Anniemie Dupuis' diary at the end, I show her registering her differing theory of translation to Martin Krol, the other 'translator': 'I'd always seen the formal empathy of my translations as naked masks, voice masks, *après tu*. Martin believed that one was making "versions" and had the licence, obligation, to tamper.' Tamper, of course, is a pejorative word, and I'm trying to complex the ontological status of the poems here in the fiction, but this could also be seen as a genuine choice of translation theories.

Before proceeding to the next question, we at COLONY would like to be the first to offer you the experience of seeing yourself reflected in a translation done by a human. Cristòfol Subira has very kindly agreed to "butcherise", one of your poems. This is his word, which he assures us in his email is not pejorative. In fact, he adds, "The traduction of poems is always, ¡but always! born of the love that one has for the language (sic) and respect also that is had for the poet even if later is possible to critic the traduction."

20 (from *masks*)

capucha de goma anvers

aquí voz dientes
chasquean aire
con aliento de mazmorra

dentificatón superhéreo mali-
dentificado
diapasón de sexo insecto

lustre liso al toque
deshumano
integumento prieto

aislado con cuervo
ensombrado de fuerte abrazo
intumescence película pod

& corteza
cabellera & cibelina
cordillera

cráneo cosido
para agujas de luz
labios

fruncidos por
piel de goma forman un
puchero sonrojado rojas

lentes (traumani-
atadura) enmarcan muertos
ojos pardos parpadeantes párpados

un embudo para que plumee
la cola de caballo falsa
la atezada cabeza alisada

húmedas fosas nasales
con piercing escurren la cadena
por la garganta muerde la última palabra

libre

Thank Cristòfol for that. Tell him that my supposition about an ‘uncanny sense of recognition and displacement’ was entirely justified. It feels like my poem but it’s ‘transworded’ to use your term into other (often recognisable) words. It’s music, but transposed into an unusual key. Perhaps it’s what you meant when you wrote in one of your poems:

Ultimately
in the best translations
rely to rewrite?

His poem comes hot on the tail of my appearance at the North Wales International Poetry Festival in Bangor where (to my surprise, and Zoë Skoulding is the guilty party) I was billed as ‘René Van Valckenborch (BE)’ and had to shyly fess up that I was not him! But there were poets from Poland and Iceland, Wales and Austria, and there was a lot of three-way translation and macaronic play. A couple of months ago (also at Bangor) I heard Pierre Joris say that the life of any poem is infinite because he imagines it as being translated eternally – and still the poem will be unfinished. I think listening to Eriður Órn Norddahl or Christine Huber made that true for me. And now Cris (if I may) has launched the Van Valckenborch oeuvre on that trajectory. Perhaps this is a special, translingual, instance of the inexhaustibility of reading.

At the core of A Translated Man is the linguistic conflict in Belgium, which is also a cultural and economic conflict, but it’s a bit of an elephant in A Translated Man’s room. You don’t really address

the conflict. Do you think poetry (or even translation of poetry) can serve politics in meaningful ways, or is it more a case of politics serving poetry?

It may be the elephant in the room, but you can smell it, I hope. The very division between poetics, languages, groups of poems encodes much of that history in the doubled superstructure of the book, content in the form. There are various specific references to political and historical events: the Marc Dutroux cover-up, the long interregnum between governments that hangs behind the disintegration of Annemie Dupuis in her diary entries at the end, the reference to Halle-Vilvoorde (a place where representatives remain unelected to either regional parliament), the remarks about hoaxes and monarchists in the introduction. These matters are woven through the texts, which are generally *about* other matters. I guess I wanted to avoid my creature stating the obvious, or being a national stereotype. Also my knowledge of Belgium is limited. As Tom Jenks remarks (or quotes) in his new book *Items*: 'It's not as easy as it looks to invent a Belgian!'

My answer to your wider point is more theoretical, and I think I still stand by Herbert Marcuse's insistence that 'in its autonomy art both protests' prevailing social realities, 'and at the same time transcends them. Thereby art subverts the dominant consciousness.' More epigrammatically: 'The autonomy of art contains the categorical imperative: things must change.' Adorno's monumental negative version of the imperative in *Aesthetic Theory* states that aesthetic form carries a tortured utopian critique, even if the matter of a particular artwork is tainted by history's evils and society's inequities, and (more importantly) even if it is not. 'The unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form,' says Adorno, although he is careful to state that 'formal elements are not facily interpretable in political terms', that is: the formal power can't simply be converted into message. I'm trying to write a critical book on form at the moment so I'm acutely aware of this issue, at that level of generality.

As a *poet* I have no illusions about social efficacy. My book *Warrant Error* didn't stop the War on Terror; *A Translated Man* won't heal Belgium's wounds. But it might affect the sensibilities of those who read it to regard the war on terror and bi-lingualism or split nations differently, but I couldn't be prescriptive about what that affectivity would be, because of the very inexhaustibility of any literary work, the 'singularity of literature' as Derek Attridge calls it.