

With the Zukofskys on Helicon Hill

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CINDERELLA's missing slipper was very probably made of fur and not, as the popular legend has it, of glass. The glass slipper was introduced by an early translator of Perrault who apparently could not distinguish *vair* from *verre*. From the start everyone agreed that the mistranslation was peculiarly right and it became an indispensable detail of the story. The roads of genius are crooked ones and this applies to translation as much as to original writing. The history of Bible criticism provides another example. The famous image which matches the difficulty of the rich man's entry to heaven with that of a camel passing through the eye of a needle has been interpreted in numerous ways. Some scholars have accounted for the camel by claiming that it was a mistranslation of an obscure word *κάμιλος* meaning ship's cable. If it is a mistake, there is no doubt that it improves on the original. A third example of creative mistranslation may be found in the description of Falstaff's death in *Henry V*. Editors have traced Shakespeare's detailing of symptoms to a passage in Galen which lists the clinical features of death. According to Galen, one symptom is that the shape of the nose becomes *aquilinus*. Falstaff's nose is 'sharp as a pen'. Can it be that Shakespeare's version was suggested by the syllable *quil* in the Latin?

In each of these cases the mistranslation was the result of a process of association which has little to do with the straight roads of scholarly translation. One word suggests another similar to it in shape or sound and a new, peculiarly appropriate, image is born. In spite of the felicity of many such errors no one systematically adopted this method of translation until Ezra Pound made his first, seminal, translations. Being a modern and aware of the importance of what happens in the secret caverns of the mind, Pound deliberately allowed verbal associations to influence his translation. Perhaps the most famous of these is the

line of Propertius *Cimbrorumque minas et benefacta Mari* which Pound rendered 'Welsh mines and the profit Marus had out of them'. To say, as some critics did, that this is slovenly and inaccurate is to miss the point. Pound was carefully deploying a schoolboy howler to fire his translation into a new life.

All of this is a necessary preface to a new and intriguing translation of Catullus by the American writers Celia and Louis Zukofsky.¹ The Zukofskys clearly derive from the tradition of the *felix culpa*. They have taken Pound's method and extended its implications (sometimes to the point of absurdity). Here are some examples: *comata silva* becomes 'A tree combed with leaves'; *fugit te* becomes 'fidgety'; *misit impiorum* becomes 'misfit emporium'; *nec se videt* becomes 'neck say with it'; *assidue* becomes 'acid a way'; *antistans mihi milibus trecentis* becomes 'who stands, my eye, before the truckload of them'. Others are apt and enrich the context: 'uncontrollable fretting seas' (*impotentia freta*); 'what gust extinguishes' (*istinc*); 'that linen toll lifted from negligents' (*tollis lintea neglegentiorum*); 'or as if to trumpet Jupiter' (*sive utrumque Iuppiter*). These verbal dexterities derive from Pound in two ways: in the carefully manipulated irreverence of the tone and in the deliberate flouting of the niceties of scholarly translation. The impiety is heir to Pound's belief that classical literature should be rescued from the museum. It is evident in phrases such as 'the truckload of them'. It is equally obvious when the Zukofskys translate the beginning of Catullus' poem on spring (*iam ver egelidos refert tepores*) with the consciously deflating 'Warm gale, a dose of spring — revert to the pores'. This tone is clearly calculated to banish piety, to shock us into recognizing the reality of classical poetry. It lifts the veil, awakes the statue, breaks up the marmoreal repose. The words move again, are energies for us at another time and in another civilization.

In much the same way, the deliberate mistranslations mock the notion of scholarly accuracy. Scholars and professional classicists allow literature to petrify on their hands. While they ponder scholarly niceties the essence of the poem evaporates. For them literature is a dead body awaiting dissection; it is not an energy

¹ Catullus: *Gai Valeri Catulli Veronensis Liber*, London: Cape Goliard Press, 1969. 38s.

that makes for meaning, not a conductor between one age and another. 'Lord, what would they say, / Did their Catullus walk that way?' It is in rebellion against such constipation that Pound and the Zukofskys have perpetrated their schoolboy howlers. The Welsh coal mine, the dose of spring, the misfit emporium thumb their nose at scholarly exactitude, while finding a new creativity in the means of their rebellion. The errors are not only anti-authoritarian; they are also designed to explode the poem into life.

Here we come to a major difference between Pound and the Zukofskys. In order to appreciate, say, Pound's version of Propertius, it is not necessary to read the original. The value of the original is that it has inspired Pound to recreate it, has given him a suitable persona through which to consider the relations between a poet and the values of his society. The irreverence is largely inherent in the tone; we can enjoy 'Welsh mines' without actually recognizing the perversion of *Cimbrorumque minas*. With the Zukofskys the method is more complex. Latin and English are printed to face each other on opposite pages. In this case it is an advantage to understand Latin though even the non-Latinate reader must be expected to get the point. The Zukofskys are inviting their readers to make the connections, to play off the Latin words against the English. The result is a series of puns, of minor linguistic explosions. Where in the case of Pound the explosions are largely subterranean, here they are brought to our notice as a significant part of the technique.

This yoking with violence together is also, I suspect, intended to work on another level. The verbal connections are designed to exploit the similarities and the differences between the worlds of Catullus and of the Zukofskys. Writing of the *Cantos* Louis Zukofsky once borrowed a phrase from Pound himself — the *Cantos* are an image of his world, 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'.¹ This might be relevant to the Zukofskys' own intentions in their *Catullus*. So might another reference to the *Cantos* where Louis Zukofsky discusses Pound's overlapping technique, a technique paralleled by Dante, who

¹ This and other passages of criticism are quoted from Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions* (1967).

refers to Virgil, who refers to Homer. This is 'an ideation directed towards inclusiveness, setting down one's extant world and other existing worlds, interrelated in a general scheme of people speaking in accord with the musical measure, or spoken about in song'. Perhaps it is towards some such ideal of inclusiveness that the linguistic coincidences are directed.

Inclusiveness is also, in part, the key to another factor in the translation. In so far as they are able the Zukofskys have tried to recreate in English the sound pattern of the original. To put it in their own words: 'This translation of Catullus follows the sound, rhythm, and syntax of his Latin — tries, as is said, to breathe the "literal" meaning with him.' For an example consider the most celebrated of all Catullus' poems.

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.
nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

O th' hate I move love. Quarry it fact I am, for that's
so re queries.

Nescience, say th' fiery scent I owe whets crookeder.

When placed against the Latin original, this translation is seen to be doing three things. First of all, it attempts to recreate the sound and shape of the original. Secondly, by so doing it suggests a number of localized puns (e.g. 'Quarry it fact I am'). Thirdly, though limited by these other objectives, it also approximates to the meaning of the original. In this example the last phrase is not readily intelligible. There are many other passages where the Zukofskys fail to suggest any meaning at all and the words have significance merely because as English words they echo the sound of the Latin. The reasoning behind this practice seems to be as follows. If the coincidence in sound between certain English and Latin words allows it, a translation of the sense is obviously desirable. If not, it is enough to reverberate the sound. In his essay, 'A Statement for Poetry', Louis Zukofsky has actually claimed that great poetry can transcend linguistic barriers. The human tradition embodied in poetry is something to which we can all tune in even when we do not understand the words. Like Heinrich Schliemann enraptured by the drunken miller's rendering of Homer, we may find that the exact verbal significance is irrelevant.

This appears to make all translation superfluous. However, the Zukofskys are not claiming this as an ideal; they are merely suggesting that much of the essential nature of a poem evades the linguistic nets of the translators. Here they touch hands with Shelley and G. H. Lewes and all those theorists who despair of translation because it cannot reproduce that particular relation of syllable to syllable which 'Deals out that being indoors each one dwells'. Almost alone among translators they have attempted to overcome this by reproducing the sound of the original. In some cases they can get no further than this, or a rough approximation of it. This is the minimum requirement. In other cases they can offer us simultaneously the sound of the original (somewhat distorted) and a commentary or translation.

So much, then, for the Zukofskys' ideals and intentions. What remains to be considered is the extent to which their translation has succeeded. My main feeling is that it is a brave, and ingenious, attempt, which is largely a failure. The first major weakness is the all too frequent obscurity:

Oke not himself a kid of writ, pot true he paired up so he'd hip some
 sure uncle-aunt: pot true had readied it, Har (poke) rot him!
 Quite a will that fay kid: now qualm wise his roommate in sum
 unc' pot true *um*, where bum noway figured on pot ruse.

The Zukofskys might defend this by claiming that it recaptures the sound pattern of the original lines. To me it *reads* like sound and fury signifying nothing. The sonic values of words have been unduly neglected in recent poetry. Yet however much we believe in these values we can hardly remain satisfied with the kind of poetry which has no connections with intelligence. Some of the Zukofskys' verse does not even aspire to meaning:

Quid, fact, it is Gelli? quick'ning mother, at (queer) sis, all three
 prurient objects this spare vigil without tunics — kiss?
 Quid, fog, it's his betrayed uncle no — see (nit) has he married whom?
 Eh quid squeeze quantum's ooze skippy hot, scald or hiss?

Match this against Louis Zukofsky's objective of 1930: 'The order of all poetry is to approach a state of music wherein the ideas present themselves sensuously and intelligently and are of no predatory intention . . .' The gap between the ideal and the fact is in the apparent absence of ideas, with or without predatory

intentions. And where is the 'dance of the intelligence among words and ideas' — the Poundian ideal to which Zukofsky pays such obsequious homage?

This obscurity ramifies in several ways. One is the irritating tendency to convert the simplicities of Catullus into a series of crossword clues: 'his little sack of plenty's Arachne's web'; 'destiny's *is* is *miss* her'; 'query is his destiny emaciate?' This sometimes leads the translators into the Latinate and donnish obscurities we would expect them to scorn. A related ailment is the quaint jargon which recurs throughout the book. Key words in the Latin (*quam*, *magis*, *miser*, *mult-*) breed an odder set of key words in English ('qualm', 'maggot', 'miss her', 'mulled' or 'moult'). The resultant effect is strained and often difficult. The tone is unromantic, frequently morbid. This may be the Zukofskys' comment on the impossibility of pure love, or it may be their effort to interpret what Catullus is trying to say. Whatever the motive, the result is untrue to Catullus, or, if read as twentieth-century cynicism, is an inadequate response to one of the world's great poets of love. This crabbed and offensive diction conceals from the English reader the musical qualities of Catullus' verse. The Zukofskys do not always fail, but for the most part the sound is distorted, with the effect of a hideous parody. For them at any rate this bell has not rung true over the centuries; the voice has become cracked and misanthropic.

Here lies the main failing of these translations. They do not as a whole allow us to tune in to the Catullus of the European tradition. Nor do they substitute a credible or interesting voice. The voice of the Zukofskys is cynical; contorted; sourly questioning; boringly monotone. The vocabulary sometimes changes suddenly from classical Roman usage to contemporary American but the manner, the tone scarcely changes at all. This voice knows no modulations, no enriching varieties. This is sad, because just here where the Zukofskys are weakest Catullus is at his best. He is, in many ways, a poet of astounding range. Without apparent effort he can switch from an elegy for a dead sparrow to political invective; from a jocular dinner invitation to a lover's fear of transience; from delicate appreciation of natural beauty to scurrilous abuse. For each mood there is an appropriate voice. The vocabulary so rich in the diminutives of endearment also

bristles with an armoury of pornographic abuse. Shifts of tone occur not only between poem and poem but also within the poems (as for example in the wonderful no. XI). Donne could have matched this but the Zukofskys cannot. Here too the obscurity is a crucial flaw. Catullus' voice, through all its shifts, is direct, simple, passionate. It knows what it means to say. It is immediately apprehensible. Its most powerful effects are often the most simple: *nox est perpetua una dormienda; odi et amo; nunc iam illa non vult*. Catullus as impersonated by the Zukofskys cannot approach this. He stutters. His words are awkward; he has problems with his meaning. The sense hobbles unhappily from line to line. I am reminded of Roger Ascham's tart observation: 'even the best translation is, for mere necessity, but an evil-imped wing to fly withal or a heavy stump leg of wood to go withal . . .' For all their ingenuity, the Zukofskys are never able to lay down the crutches of translation and fly. The air of Helicon hill is too rarefied to bear these cumbersome wings.

Evening near India

The jackal's yelp from empty fields,
 Firelight on bony faces,
 Confirm earlier images in black and white:
 Shuttered villages silently perched
 On long horizons;
 Cartloads of jute,
 Foam-flecked muzzles,
 The idiot drivers asleep.
 The forests of the Terai
 Once green and fabled
 Now lie sapless and ploughs pick
 At the hopeless land.
 Above all, in the twilight
 Like an emblem of underdevelopment
 Hangs a swathe of dust and woodsmoke,
 The grey flag of poverty
 And despair in poor countries.

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