CONSIDERING SOME OF HARDY’S ADAPTATIONS

by ERIC CHRISTEN

Κατθάνοισα δὲ κείσηι, οὐδέ ποτα μναμοσύνα σέθεν
ἔσσετ’ οὐδὲ πόθα ⟨εἰς⟩ ὕστερον· οὐ γὰρ πεδέχεις βρόδων
τῶν ἐκ Πιερίας· ἀλλ’ ἀφάνης κὴν Ἀΐδα δόμοις
φοιτάσεις πὲδ ἀμαύρων νεκύων ἐκπεποταμένα.

IMITATIONS, ETC.

Sapphic Fragment

“Thou shalt be – Nothing.” – Omar Khayyám.
“Tombless, with no remembrance.” – W. Shakespeare.

Dead shalt thou lie; and nought
Be told of thee or thought,
For thou hast plucked not of the Muses’ tree:
And even in Hades’ halls
Amidst thy fellow-thralls
No friendly shade thy shade shall company!

(Hardy, *Poems of the Past and the Present*)

In a letter to Swinburne, dated 1 April 1897, Hardy wrote:

> And this reminds me that one day, when examining several English imitations of a well-known fragment of Sappho, I interest myself in trying to strike out a better equivalent for it than the commonplace “Thou, too, shall die” &c. which all the translators had used during the last hundred years. I then stumbled upon your “Thee, too, the years shall cover”, & all my spirit for poetic pains died out of me. Those few words present, I think, the finest *drama* of Death and Oblivion, so to speak, in our tongue.[1]

Finding expressive, meaningful equivalents is one of the most stimulating, and at times of the most disheartening challenges of the translator. Hardy's version of this Sapphic Fragment is, as he calls it, an imitation, not a translation; the original is poetically transposed in English. In contrast, here is a more literal translation of the same fragment:

> When you die, you will be unremembered for ever more;
> for you there will be no regret, no share in the roses
> of Pieria; invisible in Hades, as on earth,
> you will wander aimlessly among the unknown dead …[2]

Pieria is the sacred area where the Muses reside, at the foot of the domain of the gods, Mount Olympus. *For you there will be no regret, no share in the roses of Pieria* means, 'As you have not composed poetry, you will not reside with the poets – you will not be remembered'. Hardy expresses this in a different way: *thou hast plucked not of the Muses' tree*. In this *imitation* we can notice the fine rhythm and the subtle alliteration – *sh* in *shall* and *shade* – in the last line: *No friendly shade thy shade shall company!*

From Greece to Rome, or rather, to Lake Garda in the North of Italy. Hardy had seen it on his way back from Milan in the spring of 1887. Sirmione is a peninsula on Lake Garda, where the Roman poet Catullus (c.84-c.54 BC) had an estate.

Caius Valerius Catullus

XXX

> Paene insularum, Sirmio, insularumque
> Ocelle, quascumque in liquentibus stagnis
> Marique vasto fert uterque Neptunus,
> Quam te libenter quamque laetus inviso,
> Vix mi ipse credens Thuniam* atque Bithunos
> Liquisse campos et videre te in tuto.
> O quid solutes est beatius curis,
> Cum mens onus reponit ac peregrino
> Labore fessi venimus larem ad nostrum
> Desideratoque acquiescimus lecto.
> Hoc est quod unum est pro laboribus tantis.
> Salve, o venusta Sirmio, atque ero gaude;
> Gaudete vosque, o Lydiae[+] lacus undae;

Ridete, quicquid est domi cachinnorum.

*_Thuniam_: Thunia is part of Bythinia, a country in Asia Minor, on the south shore of the Black Sea, where Catullus had spent a year hoping to improve his fortune – in vain; it is not far from Troad where his beloved brother died.
+_Lydiae_: Lydia was the country of Asia Minor where the Etruscans were supposed to have originated before settling in what was to become Tuscany.

To appreciate Hardy's adaptation we can first look at a fine English version, which of course Hardy could not know because it was published in 1972.[3] The Latin original is not exactly followed line by line, but sentence by sentence; the English version is rhymed and the rhythm makes it a true English poem; it is a very accurate translation.

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Bright jewel* of headlands, islands on the seas
And Neptune's+ lakes, oh Sirmio, you shine
Sparkling and beautiful, of restful ease
And joy. The thought that you are mine
Turns all my cares into untold delights
On seeing you again. Can it be true
I'm safe at last among familiar sights,
Bithynian plains° have faded from my view?
How blessed to put cares away from mind
And rest again on my familiar bed,
To come back home from distant toil to find
That this is where my toil has always led.
So hail, dear Sirmio, delight with me,
Laugh with your master, hold your sides in glee.

*_Bright jewel_: _ocelle_: eye in the sense of jewel or pearl.
+_Neptune_: Roman god of the sea and sweet water.
° _Bythinian plains_: Bythinia.

Hardy's rhymed adaptation:

Catullus XXXI

(After passing Sirmione, April 1887)

Sirmio, thou dearest dear of strands
That Neptune strokes in lake and sea,
With what high joy from stranger lands
Doth thy old friend set foot on thee!
Yes, barely seems it true to me
That no Bithynia holds me now,
But calmly and assuringly

Around me stretches homely Thou.

Is there a scene more sweet than when
Our clinging cares are undercast,
And, worn by alien moils and men,
The long untrodden still repassed,
We press the pined-for couch at last,
And find a full repayment there?
Then hail, sweet Sirmio; thou that wast,
And art, mine own unrivalled Fair!

We know how sensitive Hardy was to *genius loci*. The corpus of Catullus' works which have come down to us after two thousand years is over a hundred poems; very few are about a specific place, and yet it is the one subject which Hardy chose to adapt. From the start Hardy's emphasis is on love – *dearest dear* – while Catullus' is on charm and beauty – *ocelle*. We can notice one or two more things, such as the word *stokes* in the second line: Neptune and Sirmio thus become friendly, affectionate, soothing animated beings.

Catullus:	Paene insularum, Sirmio insularumque *Ocelle*, quascumque in liquentibus stagnis
Myer & Ormsby:	Bright *jewel* of headlands, islands on the seas And Neptune's lakes, oh Sirmio, you *shine*
Hardy:	Sirmio, thou *dearest dear* of strands That Neptune *strokes* in lake and sea,

At the end, Catullus, hailing Sirmio and the lake, tells them to be happy and laugh, while Hardy delights in owning Sirmio like a fair, beloved mate:

Catullus:	Salve, o *venusta* Sirmio, atque ero *gaude*; *Gaudete* vosque, o Lydiae lacus undae *Ridete*, quicquid est domi cachinnorum.
Myer & Ormsby:	So hail, dear Sirmio, *delight* with me, *Laugh* with your master, hold your sides in glee.
Hardy:	Then hail, *sweet* Sirmio; thou that wast, And art, mine own unrivalled Fair!

In fact, Hardy does express the beauty of the place, but his emphasis is on the feelings of *homely* love. There is an element of quiet stability in the basic rhythm chosen by him, the four-beat, extremely regular, iamb:

Sirm**io**, thou **de**arest **de**ar of **stra**nds
That **Nep**tune **stro**kes in **la**ke and **sea**
etc.

while Catullus' iamb is rather unusual, with six beats, the last two being long and consecutive, a regular rhythm which I am told is the preferred metre for satires and epigrams, not for sentimental poems such as this:

Paen' **in**su**lar**um, **Sir**mio, **in**su**larum**que
O**ce**lle, **qua**scum**qu**'in li**que**nti**bus sta**gnis
etc.

Let us consider another case of a successful *adaptation* by Hardy – not a *translation*. It seems to me that the general ideas and feelings of the original German are not betrayed – but is this the main question?

Heinrich Heine (1797-1856)	**Hardy's 'Song from Heine'**
Ich stand in dunkeln Träumen	I scanned her picture, dreaming,
Und starrte ihr Bildnis an,	Till each dear line and hue
Und das geliebte Antlitz	Was imaged, to my seeming,
Heimlich zu leben begann.	As if it lived anew.
Um ihre Lippen zog sich	Her lips began to borrow
Ein Lächeln wunderbar	Their former wondrous smile;
Und wie von Wehmutstränen	Her fair eyes, faint with sorrow,
Erglänzte ihr Augenpaar.	Grew sparkling as erstwhile.
Und meine Tränen flossen	Such tears as often ran not
Mir von den Wangen herab –	Ran then, my love, for thee;
Und ach, ich kann's nicht glauben	And O, believe I cannot
Dass ich dich verloren hab!	That thou art lost to me!

[A more literal translation of the poem might be: I was standing in dark dreams/ And I stared at your picture,/ And the beloved face/ Secretly came to life.// About your lips appeared/ A smile wonderful,/ And as from tears of longing/ Gleamed both your eyes.// And my tears flowed/ Down my cheeks -/ And O! I cannot believe this:/ That I have lost you!]

Hardy's *Such tears as often ran not/ Ran then, my love, for thee* says something rather remote from Heine's *Und meine Tränen flossen/ Mir von den Wangen herab* – perhaps richer in meaning. The simplicity of Heine's *Und ach, ich kann's nicht glauben/ Dass ich dich verloren hab!* is altered to a certain extent in Hardy's poem by the use of the pronoun *thou/thee*, and by the inversion *believe I cannot* (which may have been necessary for the sake of the rhyme). Hardy's last stanza flows less easily than Heine's. Although quite close to Heine in subject and in rhythm (three beats per line), Hardy's adaptation is a different poem in style and in atmosphere, so it should be read and appreciated as such; the second stanza is so gently expressive, with such fine sounds, alliterations and rhymes, that it seems to lend itself naturally to a musical tune – a waltz, perhaps?[4]

Heine's poem, first published in the cycle *Heimkehr* in 1826, appeared again in October 1828. Franz Schubert (1797-1828) was the first of the great Romantic composers to set Heine's poetry to music – and Heine was the last poet Schubert set to music. 'Ihr Bild', composed in August, was included in his very last cycle of Lieder, *Schwanengesang* (*Swan Songs*), published in October 1828, a few weeks before Schubert's death, in November. In this cycle Schubert's Lied in B flat minor, 'Ihr Bild', is placed immediately after 'Der Atlas' (which contains a line Hardy would have appreciated: 'Die ganze Welt der Schmerzen muss ich tragen' – 'The whole world of suffering must I bear'). Hardy doesn't seem to have been aware of Schubert's genius – at that time very few people were – but surely '*such a dream is Time*' that Schubert's Lied '*has perished not, but is blent with* Hardy's poems *in the full-fugued song of the universe unending*'.[5]

In the margin of his personal copy [now in private hands] of Baudelaire's *Les Fleur du mal*[6], Hardy jotted down his adaptation of the last four lines of the fourth poem called 'Spleen':

> - Et de longs corbillards, sans tambours ni musique,
> Défilent lentement dans mon âme; l'Espoir,
> Vaincu, pleure, et l'Angloisse atroce, despotique,
> Sure mon crâne incline plante son drapeau noir.

Hardy's version is truly that of a great poet:

> And hearses gaunt, without a sound,
> Crawl through my soul in tedious train:
> Hope sobs, and Pain, a tyrant crowned,
> Rears her bleak banner on my brain.

This again is not a literal translation – for example, *Défilent* is not *Crawl*, but 'march in procession' – and yet these for lines eloquently transfer the ideas, the feelings, the metaphors and even, somehow, the rhythms of the original. One may wish Hardy had adapted more of Baudelaire's verse!

One last but significant echo is from 'The Voice of Things':

> And I hear the waters wagging in a long ironic laughter
> At the lot of men …

Baudelaire in 'Obsession':

> Je te hais, Océan! tes bonds et tes tumults,
> Mon esprit les retrouve en lui; ce rire amer
> De l'homme vaincu, plein de sanglots et d'insultes,
> Je l'entends dans le rire énorme de la mer.

Reading, translating, imitation, adapting, responding, transforming: all these emotional, intellectual and artistic activities are part of the general creative process. Until the twentieth century one of the main tasks of students of literature was not so much to analyse poems and prose excerpts, but to translate and to compose poetry; the schoolboy Shakespeare had to translate Ovid in Stratford, and in Hawkshead Wordsworth had both to translate Horace and Virgil, and compose Latin poems in imitation of them. Only a few years ago Ted Hughes produced his own English version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I see literature and all the other forms of art as one large, complex stream, in which writers respond to other writers and creative artists, and provide their own views with added energy. No writer is an island. Artists, musicians, thinkers play their part in the literary process. Classical art and architecture is inconceivable without Greek and Latin mythology and without the corresponding literature. Any work of art is the result of a constant multiple-way osmosis. Setting a poem to music, illustrating a scene from a novel, turning a play into an opera and a

story into a film: aren't these just other forms of *translations*? Learning another language in order to be able to read its literature is one essential step towards enlarging and deepening one's culture and therefore one's creative capacities. Endeavouring to translate, imitate or adapt some of its works does not only enable one to penetrate its substance more deeply, it also uncovers some aspects of one's own language and culture for the benefit of both translator and reader.

Quite obviously Hardy knew this. 'I have lived with shades': if his literary 'shades' are mainly those who wrote in English, those of the poets of the past whose creations were in Greek, Latin and French (even in German and Italian which he read in translation) are not to be set aside when assessing his poetry, which is nourished by his knowledge and understanding of other literatures, as it is enriched by his appreciation of music, architecture, painting and sculpture: all this is combined with his own experience of life and everything he *noticed* around him. Paradoxically, but not unexpectedly, the poet whose name is most closely linked to a specific part of England, limited in space and time, is one of the most universal.

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[1] eds. Purdy and Millgate, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, vol.2 (Oxford: OUP, 1980)
[2] *SAPPHO Poems and Fragments*, transl. Josephine Balmer (London: Brilliance Books, 1984)
[3] *CATULLUS The Complete Poems for Modern Readers*, transl. Reney Myers and Robert J. Ormsby (London: Unwin Books, 1972)
[4] As far as I know, it hasn't been set to music; but I would be delighted to have some information about this.
[5] Hardy, 'In A Museum'.
[6] Baudelaire (1821-1867) was himself a superb translator, and his French adaptation of E.A. Poe's prose and verse have now become part of the rich flow of French literature.