

SHAKESPEARE FOR 'THE PEOPLE'

François-Victor Hugo translates *Henry V*'

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It is a commonplace that the translation of a literary text can never be entirely faithful to the original. However hard the translator tries, he will never succeed in doing absolute justice to each nuance and subtlety of his source text. Even though this view of translation has acquired proverbial status, it seems worth noting that rather than obscure the original, the act of translation may on occasion also illuminate the source in special ways. This may be illustrated with reference to Shakespeare's *Henry V* in the nineteenth-century translation by François-Victor Hugo, son to the famous poet, playwright, and novelist as well as a prolific author on Shakespeare, Victor (-Marie) Hugo.

Henry V does not at first sight appear the most difficult of Shakespeare's plays to translate. The translator is not confronted with multiple ambiguities as in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Shakespeare's early comedy with its with many-layered puns that inevitably produce bland variants in any other tongue. Nor is the translator, by contrast, faced with lines that are nearly impossible to translate because they are so well known to non-native speakers of English. "To be or not to be" has acquired universal status. It will more easily effect a willing suspension of disbelief if spoken in English, than a new translation might. Also, *Henry V* contains few if any lines that are not only famous but also so simple as to defy a satisfactory rendering in another language. Famous and of great simplicity in *Henry V* is, of course, Henry's description of himself and his men on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt as: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers". Still, the play contains no "Never, never, never, never, never", like the First Folio *King Lear*, nor is there in *Henry V* anything like Macbeth's "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow", or, also from *Macbeth*, the bewitching line "Fair is foul and foul is fair". It might even be thought that *Henry V* is easier to translate than most other Shakespeare plays, especially into French, because it has a scene entirely in French which can be taken over verbatim.

The real difficulty for a translator of *Henry V* lies in the fact that this history play is more babylonian than any other Shakespeare text. The serious translator not only needs to tackle Shakespeare's Elizabethan English; he equally needs to find viable solutions for the Welsh dialect of Fluellen, the Scottish lilt of Macmorris, and the

Irish brogue of Jamy. The passages in supranational Latin can, fortunately, be left untranslated, but how about the French spoken at various moments by Katherine of France, her lady-in-waiting Alice, by Monsieur le Fer, by the Boy, and by Bardolph? Even King Henry mouths the odd word of French and a fair amount of broken French. If along the lines of George Steiner translation may be seen as an attempt to counter the babylonian curse, *Henry V* would seem to represent the ultimate challenge. François-Victor Hugo's French rendering of the play bears this out.

Before turning to Shakespeare's history play, which has over the centuries been described as "jingoistic", "nationalistic", and "patriotic", it may be worth briefly to recall that the François-Victor Hugo translation came into existence under rather extraordinary circumstances between 1852 and 1865. As his famous father Victor Hugo explains in his study of Shakespeare, dedicated to the English nation, the translation of the complete works was produced while the Republican father and his no less Republican son were in exile on Jersey - "une île voisine des côtes de France",²

In 1848, Victor Hugo had been a staunch supporter of Louis-Napoléon as President of what was to become the (second) Republic. Soon after, however, Hugo increasingly came to represent the left wing of the *Assemblée*, and was, as a consequence, opposed to Louis-Napoléon's projected revision of the constitution in 1851, which was really an attempt to re-establish the Empire with himself as Emperor at its head. In December of that same year, Hugo tried to mount large-scale opposition to the plan, but when Napoléon's *coup d'état* looked like being a success, and the establishment of the *Second Empire* was only a matter of time, Hugo turned his back on "Napoléon-le-Petit", as he derisively called the statesman, and fled to Brussels. At Brussels, he was joined by François-Victor. As one of the editors of the left-wing paper *L'Événement*, François-Victor Hugo had encountered opposition much like his father. Although the newspaper had been in support of the candidacy of Louis-Napoléon in 1848, its public sales were prohibited in 1850, and the editors imprisoned for taking sides against the President a year later. On his release, François-Victor opted for self-exile and joined his father in Brussels in 1852, from where both traveled to the Channel Island of Jersey - known at the time as one of "the smaller islands in the British Ocean". This is how Victor Hugo, largely in the form of a dialogue, describes the genesis of the translation project itself:

One morning near the end of November, two inhabitants of the place [i.e. Marine-Terrace, Jersey], the father and the youngest of his sons, were sitting in the low-ceilinged hall. They did not speak, and were deep in thought, like those who are shipwrecked.

Outside it was raining, the wind blew, the house seemed deafened by the roar outside. Both were daydreaming, perhaps engrossed by the idea that the beginning of winter and the beginning of their exile coincided.

Suddenly, the son raised his voice and questioned the father:

- What is your idea about this exile?
- That it will be long.
- How are you thinking of filling your time?

The father replied:

- I shall be watching the ocean.

A short silence followed. The father continued:

- And you?
- As for myself, the son said, I shall translate Shakespeare.³

It is not my intention in this paper to explore further the more philosophical connections between the exile of the Hugos, and the translation of Shakespeare. In a lengthy and detailed article, to which I am much indebted, Nicole Mallet has effectively argued that François-Victor Hugo's Shakespeare translation project intersects with many political tendencies current in mid-19th century Europe.⁴ Nevertheless, it may be worth briefly to indicate a connection which Mallet does not discuss. It is intriguing that François-Victor should have classified *Henry V* with the other history plays under the theme of *La Patrie*, particularly in view of the translator's Republican views.⁵ François-Victor believed that history was a gigantic stage play written by an omnipotent genius and performed by four actors in succession: *Papistry*, *Feudality*, *Royalty*, and *The People*. Moreover, it was his belief that by the mid-1850s, three Acts had been played and that the curtain was rising on the fourth.⁶ Indeed there is much more to be explored here with regard to the late-Romantic reception of Shakespeare in Europe, and in France in particular. Yet, what interests me in this exploratory paper are the curious linguistic hurdles which the translator encountered while attempting to make intelligible on behalf of the *Peuple* of France a macaronic play by Shakespeare about English royalty and its fifteenth-century invasion of France.

Henry V offers a veritable wealth of scenes of interest in this connection, divisible into two categories. On the one hand, there are the linguistic features which may be considered as largely unconnected with the invasion of France that is at the centre of the play. On the other hand, there are those which may be directly related to the continental conquest; the bilingualism in the play on such occasions symbolizes the conquest in linguistic terms.

One translation problem of the more general kind, is the dialect in *Henry V* used



François-Victor Hugo, the youngest son of the famous poet. Drawn, in 1847 by his mother (Musée Victor Hugo).

by the representatives of a greater Britain. François-Victor Hugo attempts to preserve a semblance of the idiosyncrasies. Fluellen's "to the preaches" (244) in French becomes "A la prèche" (245), a bastardization of "à la brace". Not only his phonetic oddities are somehow preserved, but also his grammatical fingerprint remains: "the mines is not according to the disciplines of the wars" (246), with its faulty concord, in French is rendered as "les mines n'est pas dans les règles de la guerre" (247). It is not certain if Hugo was trying to approximate an existing French dialect, but in a way the consistently stylized rather than realistic oddities of Fluellen have a convincing ring. Is this how a Welshman speaks French?

Matters are strikingly different where the Scot Jamy is concerned. In the nineteenth-century French rendering of Shakespeare's play, an attempt is made to approximate the Scottish with its rolling *rs* by opting for a Creole accent, an accent available for literary usage as the result of an earlier form of invasion, or act of colonization by the French themselves. Reading out loud certainly helps to convey more clearly the type of dialect that Hugo was deriving from the French colonies:

Par la messe, avant que ces yeux-là se livrent au sommeil, ze fehai de la besogne ou je sehai poté en terre; oui-da! ou je sahai mort; paiehad de ma personne aussi vaillamment que ze pouhai, ze m'y engage, en un mot, comme en mille. Mobleu! ze sehais bien aise d'ouïr use discussion entre vous deux. (251)

In the 1970s, J. B. Fort could still note that Hugo's choice of alternative dialects was not felicitous (251); nowadays one is inclined to say that such translation strategies are not politically correct. This derogatory use of one of the French empire's many tongues may well explain why the editorial staff of the new parallel Flammarion edition of Shakespeare's complete works currently under production decided, without dismissing all of Hugo's translations for the project, at least for *Henry V* to commission a new translation. However, one wonders if Sylvère Monod's translation of 1991 is preferable:

pour donner au lecteur français une impression correspondant, au moins approximativement, à celle que produit le texte original, nous avons considéré que les particularités phonétiques et psychologiques de Fluellen rappelaient celles d'un Français de l'Est, que Macmorris faisait penser à un Méridional, et Jamy à un Normand.⁷

The transposition of the speech of the British ex-centrics to that of speakers from beyond the *Ile de France* might one day invite the province to strike back. Moreover,

in the wake of this move, one notes a tendency also to speculate on issues of national or regional character. One doubtful gesture soon gives rise to another.⁸ But, as was indicated earlier, these differences are unrelated to the idea of invasion. They would have arisen equally in the case of a translation of, say, *Patient Grissil*, a comedy by one of Shakespeare's contemporaries in London, Thomas Dekker, who brings on stage the Welshman Sir Owen Ap Rice speaking broken English with a marked accent that recalls the speech of Fluellen in *Henry V*.

Matters change when one concentrates on invasion-related material, as when, to begin with a fairly light problem, the French in the English version of the play have occasional interjections in their native French tongue like "O dieu vivant" (2.4), or "le cheval volant". Admittedly, it is a curious matter also in Shakespeare's original for the French to speak correct English throughout most of the scene only to revert to French for the odd exclamation. François-Victor Hugo tries to solve the problem by presenting Shakespeare's French in italics to set it off against his own French. Monod uses inverted commas for this purpose. In both cases, however, the solution only works on the page and not on the stage. How does the French actor speak italics? Does he mark Shakespeare's French with the irritating gesture suggestive of quotation marks? Even if these translations were explicitly intended for the reader and not for the theatre audience, the fact remains that they are only partly successful. Surprising new suggestions are found for the problems caused by the play's multilingualism. One solution, however, always creates a new problem.

Nevertheless, the most difficult scene of *Henry V* to translate - and not surprisingly the scene in which the conquest of France by England materializes in the form of a written treaty - is the scene that ends the play, presenting the peace negotiations at Troyes, and especially the courtship between King Henry and Katherine of France, with Alice, her lady in waiting, as an occasional interpreter (5.2). Given the various parties and their attempts to cross the language barrier, the scene is an amalgam of correct French and broken French, correct English and broken English. To complicate matters, there is a wide range of self-conscious, metalinguistic comment on the dialogue in progress. In Dutch, the imagination is stretched by passages like the following:

KONING HENRY: Maar - verstaat U zoveel Engels om dit te verstaan: Kunt U mij liefhebben?

CATHERINE: Det kan ik niet zeggen.

Or, later in the scene:

KONING HENRY: Kom, laat je antwoord klinken in gebroken muziek - je stem is muziek en je Engels is gebroken. Dus, koningin van alles, Catherine, verbreek je stilzwijgen in gebroken Engels: wil je me hebben?

CATHERINE: Det is als het zal behagen le roi mon père.⁹

The French version, especially that of François-Victor Hugo, beats all others:

LE ROI HENRY. - O charmante Catherine, si vous voulez m'aimer de tout votre cœur français, je serai bien aise de vous l'entendre confesser dans votre anglais estropié. Que vous semble de moi, Kate?

CATHERINE. - *Pardonnez-moi*, je ne sais ce que vous entendez par ces mots: *Que vous semble?*

LE ROI HENRY. - Un ange semble comme vous, Kate; et vous semblez comme un ange.

CATHERINE, à Alice. - *Que dit-il? que je suis semblable à les anges?*

ALICE. - *Ouy, vrayment (sauf Vostre Grace), ainsi dit-il.*

LE ROI HENRY. - Je l'ai dit, chère Catherine; et je ne dois pas arougir de l'affirmer.

CATHERINE. *O bon Dieu! les languages des hommes sont pleines de tromperies.*

LE ROI HENRY, à Alice. - *Que dit-elle, belle dame? Que les langues des hommes sont pleines de tromperies?*

ALICE. - *Ouy; que les language des hommes être pleines de tromperies; ainsi dire la princess (353).*

Henry the Fifth, who has been speaking correct French throughout the play, suddenly grows faulty when he needs to ask Catherine if she likes him, but there seems to be no psychological explanation. Not only his productive language skills but also his receptive skills suffer, as he needs to rely on Alice for help. Also, in an attempt to convey to the French reader nuances of Shakespeare's original, Katherine's broken English, like that of Alice, is translated into broken French. When Henry, in correct French, asks French Katherine if she agrees to marry him, all she can produce in reply is: "*Sauf Vostre Honneur, moi comprendre bien*" (353). Later in the scene, Katherine asks Henry: "*Est-il possible que z'aime l'ennemi de la France?*" (355), and "*Ze ne sais ce que vous voulez dire*" (357). These are not instances of *petit nègre*, of a native speaker talking down to a would-be multilingual opponent. On the contrary. In Shakespeare's original, the Princess is linguistically subjected to a king whose English is made to prevail over her mother tongue. François-Victor Hugo, translating the play into French, has the king share his language, and he reduces the woman to a babbler in her native tongue. Here Sylvère Monod's solution is more aesthetically pleasing, and less likely to be attacked for streaks of anti-feminism.

Monod cleverly translates Shakespeare's French as French in inverted commas, broken French as broken French, broken English as broken French, and English as correct French, all with the nearly foolproof safety valve of preceding each speech with a brief reference to Shakespeare's original, using such phrases as: *en anglais, en français, en mauvais anglais, mêlant français et mauvais anglais, faisant alterner l'anglais et le mauvais français, en anglais puis en mauvais français*, and other asides to the reader beyond the translation proper.¹⁰ Monod resolves the ideological ambiguity in which Hugo entangled himself, but surely the solution continues to be makeshift. A mode is found to refer to the original by special means, because the art of translation has reached its limits.

If anything, the François-Victor Hugo translation of *Henry V* illustrates that with a macaronic, babylonian text it is impossible to provide a fully convincing and satisfying translation. The greater the attempt to convey linguistic variation, the sooner the product is in danger of becoming ludicrous. The difficulty that François-Victor Hugo faced when he translated *Henry V* has been well described by Jacques Derrida. Although Derrida's argument relates to James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake*, it summarizes the problem in *Henry V* quite adequately:

Even if by some miracle one could translate all of the virtual impulses at work [...], one thing remains that could never be translated: the fact that there are two tongues here, or at least more than one. By transplanting everything into French, at best one would translate all of the virtual or actual content, but one could not translate the event which consists in grafting several tongues onto a single body.¹¹

Applying Derrida's observations to *Henry V*, we may note that on the surface, perhaps, the relation between English and Scottish is comparable to that between standard French and a Creole accent, but something eventually defies the transposition along those lines on paper. One language may be translated with a fair degree of satisfaction, just as any other language. Once those two languages operate in tandem, however, any translation will break out at the seams. Language *couplings* are inalienable. The operation of two languages that are one another's counterparts constitute the text, and the affective social and cultural interrelations between them lie at the very heart of what may be called a nation's linguistic self-identity. Paradoxically, the self-identity is not contained within each language individually, but generated by modes of contiguity. The contiguity tends to be more unique in kind as a linguistic experience and inheritance than the single tongue generally associated with single nations. Any study of linguistic identity can only succeed by incorporating the borders that mark the end of the language territory and the beginning of the

sociolinguistic as well as cultural connections.

Henry V is a play that crosses borders. It is a drama of conquest. It has often been argued that, particularly in the wooing scene, Henry with his English rhetoric subjects the French princess who speaks broken-English.¹² Ironically, Shakespeare's decision to have his king unilaterally overpower or control the other language is arguably the most effective and hence conspicuous conquest of all. As François-Victor Hugo's translation makes quite clear, it is impossible for the French to claim the text for their own language territory.

In one of the drafts of the preface to his son François-Victor's complete translation of Shakespeare's works, Victor Hugo made a number of valuable observations about the translation into French of literature like Homer or Shakespeare. The dominant image in the following passage - here translated into English for the first time - is that of a political invasion to which the native population is opposed:

To translate a foreign poet is to develop the national poetry; this development displeases those who profit from it. It is at least the beginning. The first movement is one of revolt. Any language in which one decants another idiom, so to speak, does what it can to resist. Later, that language shall be strengthened by it; for the time being, the recipient language is agitated. This new savour arouses its dislike. Those unusual phrases, those unexpected turns, that wild irruption of unknown figures of speech, all this is like an invasion. What will this mean for its indigenous literature? Who could ever think of mixing its life blood with that of other peoples? This is poetry in excess. This is the abuse of images, a profusion of metaphors, a violation of borders, a compulsory introduction of the cosmopolitan taste into the local taste. If it is Greek, it is coarse. If it is English, it is barbaric. Rough here, and sharp there. And however intelligent the nation that one means to enrich, it will inevitably be agitated. It hates such nourishment.¹³

Victor Hugo's remark about translation as a political act of invading the target nation may well be applied to his own son's French rendering of *Henry V*. The translation effort was part of a conscious attempt to have the French *Peuple* - the fourth actor in François-Victor's imagined drama of history - share in the universal genius of the Swan of Avon. In reality, it was Shakespeare's second victory. Shakespeare's great conquest play *Henry V* translated may be seen as a kind of conquest, but it had been preceded in 1599, the year in which *Henry V* premiered, by a conquest of the French language. During his disastrous reign, King Henry the Fifth's son named Henry the Sixth lost all in France that his father had gained. However, no amount of translation will ever undo Shakespeare's linguistic conquest of the French language with *Henry V*.

NOTES

- ¹ I am grateful to Ieme van der Poel (European Studies, University of Amsterdam), for her generous advice on mid-nineteenth century French politics and her critical reading of my English translations from the French.
- ² "A island close to the French coast". See Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare*, introduction by Bernard Leuilliot, Nouvelle Bibliothèque Romantique (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), 35. The political situation also explains why Victor Hugo should have dedicated his study of the Stratford master to the English nation: "A L'ANGLETERRE. Je lui dédie ce livre, glorification de son poète. Je dis à l'Angleterre la vérité; mais, comme terre illustre et libre, je l'admire, et comme asile, je l'aime. Victor HUGO. *Hauteville-House*, 1864."
- ³ Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare*, 38 (the English translation is my own).
- ⁴ Nicole Mallet, "Hugo, père et fils, Shakespeare et la traduction", in *TTR (Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction: Études sur le texte et ses transformations)*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1993), 113-30.
- ⁵ *Richard III* is curiously excluded from the *La Patrie* group. This history play is listed under *Les Tyrans* (*TTR*, 114-15).
- ⁶ Francis Vernor Guille, *François-Victor Hugo et son œuvre* (Paris: Nizet, 1950), 116. See also Nicole Mallet, 122.
- ⁷ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, translated by Sylvère Monod, with a preface and notes by R. G. Cox (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 243.
- ⁸ For a recent discussion of the use of dialect in Shakespeare's plays, and of its political implications, see Michael Neill's long and detailed discussion, "Broken English and Broken Irish: Nation, Language, and the Optic of Power in Shakespeare's Histories", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45:1 (1994), 1-32.
- ⁹ *Henry V*, translated by Dolf Verspoor, unpublished MS (1991). The quotations are from pp. 128 and 129-30 respectively.
- ¹⁰ Respectively: "in English", "in French", "in bad English", "mixing French and broken English", "alternatively in English and broken French" and "in English and later in broken French".
- ¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 99.
- ¹² See a.o. Lance Wilcox, "Katherine of France as Victim and Bride", in *Shakespeare Studies*, 17 (1985), 61-76.
- ¹³ Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare*, 339 (translation is my own).