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Review of Marcel Proust's *Un amour de Swann*
(trans. Brian Nelson)

JULIE ROSE

Proust, Marcel. *Swann in Love*. Translated by Brian Nelson, with an Introduction and Notes by Adam Watt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

One of the most accomplished translations I've read in recent years is Brian Nelson's translation of *Un amour de Swann*, Proust's famous novella-within-a-novel about a man tangled up in jealousy. Nelson's translation flows beautifully, commandingly, with rippling nervous energy. He succeeds wonderfully in capturing Proust's signature style.

And so I noted with surprise and bemusement that not a word of praise for Nelson's skill is to be found in James Grieve's review of the book in *The AALITRA Review* 13, December 2018. Grieve seems doggedly determined to focus on what are arguably imperceptible blemishes in an otherwise flawless piece of work. This produces a peculiar, carping trivialisation – of Proust, of Nelson's translation, of translation itself – that reflects badly on Grieve, not on Nelson. The same urge to carp about trivialities informs Grieve's comments on the volume's explanatory notes; strangely, he gives the impression that Nelson is responsible for these notes, though in fact they are by Adam Watt (rightly praised by Grieve for his introduction).

My concern here, though, is not with the nits Grieve picks, but with larger issues. Grieve's review has the incidental merit of inciting us to think about a number of important questions concerning translation, and the translation of Proust in particular. In a paragraph on syntax ("On the matter of syntax [...]") Grieve begins to raise these issues (64). Yet he does so in an oddly confused (and confusing) manner. He writes that Nelson "doubts the wisdom" of Lydia Davis's "retention of the precise order of elements in a sentence" (64). But at this point he seems to lose his way. I can't tell whether he is attacking Davis, or Nelson, or both. In any case, he gives a distorted impression of what Nelson says in his Translator's Note, viz.: "Davis's [...] determination to stay as close as possible to the original, not only in terms of diction but also in the retention of the precise order of elements in a sentence, runs the risk of compromising her ability to write idiomatic English" (Proust 2017, xxx). Nelson is not criticising Davis's general aim of capturing Proust's style in terms of its syntax, but drawing attention to the relative rigidity of her translation, which he contrasts with that of Scott Moncrieff (a point Grieve ignores, preferring to lump "Nelson's predecessors" together in an undifferentiated manner).

The argument may be illuminated by comparing Davis's translation of a paragraph with Nelson's. Here is Davis:

He ran his other hand up along Odette's cheek; she gazed at him steadily, with the grave and languid look of the women by the Florentine master whom he had discovered she resembled; protruding to the edges of her lids, her shining eyes, wide and thin, like theirs, seemed about to well out like two tears. She bent her neck as you see them all do, in the pagan scenes as well as in the religious pictures. And in a position that was no doubt habitual for her, which she knew was appropriate to moments like this and which

she took care not to forget to adopt, she seemed to require all her strength to hold her face back, as though an invisible force were drawing it towards Swann. And it was Swann who, before she let it fall, as though despite herself, on his lips, held it back for an instant, at a certain distance, between his two hands. He had wanted to give his mind time to catch up, to recognize the dream that it had caressed for so long and to be present at its realization, like a relative summoned to witness the success of a child she has loved very much. Perhaps Swann was also fastening upon this face of an Odette he had not yet possessed, an Odette he had not yet even kissed, this face he was seeing for the last time, the gaze with which, on a day of departure, we hope to carry away with us a landscape we are about to leave for ever.

(Proust 2002, 236)

Here is Nelson:

He ran his other hand up Odette's cheek; she gazed at him without blinking, with the grave and languid look of the women of the Florentine master in whose faces he had found a resemblance with hers; her shining eyes, wide and slender like theirs, seemed to brim at the edge of her lids and to be on the point of welling out like two tears. She tilted her head to one side, as Botticelli's women all do, in the pagan scenes as well as in the religious paintings. And in an attitude that was no doubt habitual, which she knew was appropriate to moments like this and which she made sure she would not forget to adopt, she seemed to need all her strength to hold her face back, as if some invisible force was drawing it to Swann's. And it was Swann who, for a moment, held her face away from his in his hands, before she let it fall, as though in spite of herself, onto his lips. He had wanted to give his mind time to catch up with him, to recognize the dream it had cherished for so long and to be present at its realization, like a relative invited to share in the success of a child of whom she has always been very fond. Perhaps, too, Swann was also gazing at Odette's face with the eyes of a man who looks intensely at a landscape he is about to leave forever, as if to carry it away with him, for it was a face he was seeing for the last time: Odette as she was before he slept with her, or even kissed her.

(Proust 2017, 44-45)

It's often instructive to compare translations. Anyone who'd like to examine Grieve's treatment of syntax (and register) in his own translation of *Du côté de chez Swann* (Canberra, 1982), and gauge the extent of his success in re-creating Proust, in catching the flavour, rhythm and precision of his prose, can do so: his translation, long out of print, may now be read at <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/143006>.

Grieve asks: "where is the advantage" (64) in attempting to capture Proust's syntax? The answer to this question is surely embodied in Nelson's very fine translation; it is also eloquently formulated in his Note, in which he describes Proust's style as being:

[...] largely identified with his famously long sentences, with their ‘coiling elaboration’. As they uncoil, the sentences express the rhythms of a sensibility, the directions and indirections of desire, the complications and conflicts of a mind—Swann’s—in the grip of doubts and uncertainties, obsessions and fantasies. I have tried to capture the intricate harmonies of those sentences, which combine syntactic complexity with complete clarity.

(Proust 2017, xxx)

Nelson’s success in this endeavour is everywhere apparent, so very satisfyingly, giving us a Proust that is both demandingly intricate and perfectly intelligible. Rather than acknowledge and examine this, Grieve simply plunges on to suggest, unhelpfully, that there is some kind of equation between the aim of capturing Proust’s style in terms of his syntax and “foreignization” (an attempt to make the translation “feel aptly French”) (64). He thus throws one red herring (foreignization) after another (questioning the advantage of trying to capture Proust’s style) after yet another (misrepresentation). It’s odd that Grieve invokes the bogey of foreignization, since it’s clear from Nelson’s note, and even clearer from his translation, that he is more closely aligned with Scott Moncrieff, with Moncrieff’s “exquisite ear for the cadences of Proust’s prose”, than with Davis, with her dogged “exactitude” (Proust 2017, xxx). Nelson’s “runs the risk” (referring to Davis) is obviously a diplomatic euphemism, while the passages juxtaposed above speak for themselves. Yet it’s worth dwelling briefly on the concept of foreignization, as it is problematic in various ways.

First, what does foreignization mean, and how useful is it to translators? Some of those who’ve been schooled in the art claim it’s a translation “strategy”; but when they say they’ve used it they seem to mean little more than that they write “monsieur” instead of “Mister” and keep proper names, place names and culture-specific terms or phrases in the original. Who on earth wouldn’t? When I say, in my translation of *Les Misérables*, that Jean Valjean sits down and eats a *fromage blanc*, it’s a contextual detail, from the original, that gives you his setting and status in the rural France of the day, where eating a *fromage blanc* (a small round individual cheese) was the province of peasants and paupers; we would lose this if I’d opted for “cheese”, but the precision doesn’t need to do more than it does. Similarly, an extreme literalist “strategy” would be really painful. To take two ludicrous examples: would you write “Will you be one of ours?” (French) instead of “Would you like to join us?” Or “I saw the Helmut yesterday” (German) instead of “I saw Helmut [...]”? I don’t think so. Furthermore, to some extent foreignizing relies for its effects on the reader’s knowledge of the language in question. Where does this leave the reader who has no such knowledge?

Second, the whole notion of foreignization is surely foreign, so to speak, to today’s world, especially in multilingual cities like Sydney and Melbourne. The concept worked well for Friedrich Schleiermacher, when he was writing about contemporary German translations of ancient Greek (Schleiermacher 1813), but the idea that it’s possible in this day and age to talk about “the foreign” in any sort of abstract way – particularly with respect to the translation of contemporary texts – is absurd. Look around you, in the classroom or the supermarket, on the train or the tram, and it becomes clear that each individual has a different sense of what is foreign and what is domestic or familiar.

Third, foreignization is more an ideological position than a fruitful approach to the art of translation. For Lawrence Venuti, the translator academic most closely

associated with this ideology, translation is a political practice with ethical dimensions. The task of the translator, Venuti says, is not to produce texts that appear to be originally written or effortlessly fluent in the language into which he/she translates. He advocates, rather, an approach that seeks not so much to make a text in one culture available for appreciation in another as to heighten our awareness of language itself and its uses; he also feels that such an approach to translation has the potential to involve greater respect for linguistic and cultural difference. I agree entirely with the reservations about Venuti's views expressed by Tim Parks in a lucid and sane article entitled "Mysteries of the Meta-Task":

If we assume that Venuti is proposing that a translated text offer a series of surprises and novelties in our language unlike those of an original text, how are those surprises generated, and how are they linked together to form a coherent whole? How do they stand in relation to the content and style (if we can ever separate the two) of the original text? ... When Venuti's aware and progressive "new" translator chooses solutions that are provocative and non-standard in his own language, [...] heightening awareness and alerting the reader to the translated status of the text, is he doing so in response to the pattern of effects and impressions he believes he has found in the original? Or is he imposing a predetermined strategy that could perfectly well lead to similar effects being generated in translations of quite different originals [...].

(Parks 2012: n.p.)

These are highly pertinent questions which Venuti fails to answer. To my mind, to make a translation sound like a translation does a disservice to both readers and writers. Indeed, it reflects a deep lack of respect. Real respect, if we can for a moment reduce its scope, lies in convincingly recreating the text as though it were originally written in the language of the translation and thereby producing in the new reader something as close as possible to the emotional and aesthetic impact of the original on its first readers. In other words, the pact between writer, translator and reader is paramount. If Proust sounded strange to his original audience, that would have been because of the striking particularity of his voice, a fresh new voice given shape in his native language – not because he was Greek, say, or Lithuanian, writing incompletely mastered French.

In these terms, Nelson could not have shown greater respect. The success of his translation has nothing to do with making the translation "feel French". It has everything to do with capturing Proust's style and voice and rhythms, the entire pattern of textual effects embodied in his writing, in a manner that also makes the translation feel felicitously English.

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