James Holmes and Burton Raffel on Four Ways of Translating Poetry

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Abstract
The prominent translators and critics, James Holmes and Burton Raffel, have both proposed a fourfold scheme for considering poetry translations. In general terms, these four are: (1) formal and source-text oriented, (2) formal and target-culture oriented, (3) free, and (4) "deviant", scarcely translation at all. This article suggests that the similarity between the two schemes is not coincidence but may be explained by Holmes' and Raffel's friendship based on a common interest in Indonesian literature during the 1950s. The previously unnoticed relationship adds to Francis Jones' exploration of Holmes' literary translation networks.

Introduction

This brief paper explores similar categorisations of the types of poetry translation developed by Burton Raffel (1928-2015) and James S Holmes (1924-1986). In seeking an explanation for this similarity, it argues that the schemata has its origins in a brief working relationship between the two that was concerned with the translation of Indonesian and Dutch poetry during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Both men separately had extensive and distinguished careers translating poetry and writing about translation. Yet the connection between them has not been noticed, largely, perhaps, because their personalities and areas of expertise were so very different.

James Stratton Holmes was born in 1924, the youngest of six siblings. He was raised on a farm in Collins, Iowa and studied at the Quaker College of Oskaloosa, Iowa, before serving a two years middle school teaching internship in Barnesville, Ohio. After refusing to volunteer for military service or undertake civil service, he was sentenced to a six-month jail sentence. He then returned to study in 1945, firstly at William Penn College, then Haverford College in Pennsylvania, and finally, in 1948, at Brown University. Holmes went to the Netherlands in 1950 and taught at the Quaker school at Ommen. After a year, he moved to Amsterdam, where he remained for the rest of his life. Holmes wrote poetry in English, using the pen names Jim Holmes and Jacob Lowlands. Crucially, he began publishing poetry translations from Dutch into English after 1954, and focused on that one language pair for the rest of his life. Holmes received the Martinus Nijhoff Award in 1956 and the Flemish Community Translation Award in 1984. He also taught Translation Studies and Gay Studies in the Literary Science Faculty of the University of Amsterdam and wrote the definitive paper on "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" (1972).

Burton Nathan Raffel was famed for his translations into English from a great many languages, including Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (2011)*, Beowulf* (1963), the poems of Horace (1996) and *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (2011). Born in Brooklyn of immigrant Russian Jewish parents in 1928, he was educated at Brooklyn College (BA 1948) and Ohio State University (MA 1949). Apart from taking time out for legal studies (JD, Yale Law School 1958), including a few years spent working in a law firm in New York, Raffel subsequently taught at various universities in the United States

(Brooklyn College, 1950-1951; Stony Brook University, 1964-1965; University at Buffalo, 1966-68; University of Texas at Austin, 1969-70; University of Denver, 1975-89), Canada (Ontario College of Art, 1971-72; York University, 1972-75) and Israel (University of Haifa, 1968-69), before settling at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette in 1989, where he remained until his death in 2015.

James Holmes

In his essay on "Forms of Verse Translation and the Translation of Verse Forms" (1968/ 2005), James Holmes presented an analysis of four categories of poetic translations, based on the forms used by the translators. His definition of "form" is precise. Form is "the outward or mechanical form of rhyme, metre (and/or rhythm), verse length, stanzaic patterning and division, and the like" (Holmes 31, fn. 10). He proposed four categories for the literary translation of poetry, which he called "mimetic", "analogical", "organic", and "extraneous". A fifth way of translating poetry, as prose, is dismissed as "sidestepping" the problem, 25.

In Holmes' scheme, the first approach to translating poetry, the mimetic, seeks to retain the form of the original. The translator constructs "German hexameters for Greek, or English *terza rima* for Italian" (26). Nevertheless, Holmes suggests, this attempt at conforming to the source text (ST) patterns is actually impossible, because verse forms in one language can never be completely identical to those in another language (26).

A second approach, the analogical, considers the function of the original form within its own poetic tradition and looks for a form that fills a parallel function in the tradition of the target language. According to this argument, an epic poem should be translated into a form that fulfils a parallel function in the receiving literature: the *Iliad,* for example, should be rendered in English blank verse or heroic couplets (26). This naturalises the poem and, in the process as a consequence, Pope's *Iliad* "in rhymed couplets becomes something very much like an English poem about English gentlemen, for all the Greek trappings of the fable" (27).

Both "mimetic" and "analogical" approaches are "form-derivative": that is, they are determined by the principle of "seeking some kind of equivalence in the target language for the outward form of the original poem" (26). The mimetic form is most common during those times when genre concepts are weak, literary norms are being questioned, and the target culture is open to outside influences - such as occurred in nineteenth century between England and the Netherlands, where the translation of the English Romantics permanently enriched Dutch literature (28). The analogical form brings the original poem into the receptor tradition when its own norms are strong and the culture is inward looking (the neo-classical English eighteenth century, for example), and "naturalizes" it. In Lawrence Venuti's later terms, the mimetic approach is "foreignizing", the analogical is "domesticating" (Venuti 1995).

A third, contemporary (twentieth-century), approach is to use a form that is "content-derivative". It is "organic" in as far as it allows "a new intrinsic form to develop from the inward workings of the text itself" (28). Such an approach occurs when there are no obviously predetermined extrinsic forms in which the poem can be expressed and a new intrinsic form must be found (27).

Holmes concludes with a fourth type of form, the "extraneous form", which does not derive from the original poem at all. It "casts the metapoem into a form that is in no way implicit in either the form or the content of the original" (27). The translator conforms to the formal requirements of the new poetic culture, but has greater

flexibility to transfer the "meaning" of the original poem in any way that seems appropriate. Holmes condemns this as a "devious" or "extraneous" translation, "where the form adopted is in no way implicit in either the form or the content of the original" (27).

Burton Raffel

In his essay, "The Subjective Element in Translation" (1981/1998), Raffel shifts the focus from four types of form to four types of audiences – with four different types of translations that suit them (110-128). The key word in his title is, perhaps, "subjective"; he has strong opinions on a range of authors and poems and is not afraid to present them. Fortunately he is also eager to present extensive examples of each of his categories, which Holmes is reluctant to do.

The first type of translation is "formal translation". Its audience is the scholars and their students. They require a literal, "formal", even "faithful" translation that will take them back to the original poem – or as close to it as possible. Formal translations are pedantic, because they aim to show the social, philosophical and historical dimensions of the original work, so they are often wooden as a result. Content matters and not literary quality (1998 112). The first example Raffel quotes is Alan Press' *Anthology of Troubador Lyric Poetry* (1978) and Raffel immediately skewers Press with his own words: "Elegance and grace have been – not without some regret – sacrificed to literal accuracy" (Raffel 112, Press 2).

The second type of translation is "interpretive". Its audience consists of a general set of readers, who are interested in literature for its own sake but do not have access to the original poem. (He also insists that no translation "*is, was, or ever will be the original which it translates*" 118, italics by Raffel.) In this situation, it is also possible that the translator may not always be in full control of the original but s/he knows enough about poetry to recognise the literary qualities of the text and bring them into the best English possible. His examples are Ezra Pound, "translating" from Chinese. Although Pound is "obviously not in full control of the original", he is "very firmly in charge of the translation as an independent poem" (117). Overall the hope is "to re-create something roughly equivalent in the new language, something that is itself good poetry and that at the same time carries a reasonable measure of the force and flavor of the original" (Raffel 1998: 121).

Then there are those who seek a "free" or "expansive" translation, which seeks to allow its audience, to read "something, anything, new rather than something old" (Raffel 1998: 110). The approach, which is based on the hope that one may be able to translate a first-rate poem in one language into a first-rate poem in the target language, is "arrogant", but some "poet-translators", who are not scholars, may occasionally pull it off (Raffel 1981: 31). On the whole, Raffel disapproves of this approach. He comments, with reference to Frederick Rebsamen's work *Beowulf is My Name* (1971): "The entire line of argument, that the translator can do anything he likes with his original so long as he feels, as Rebsamen explicitly does, 'that it worked better [my] way' rather than the original poet's way, seems to me to destroy what I take to be the basic purpose of translation" (125).

Finally, there are readers of "imitative translations", who want to see the translator's own poetry when it is shaped by foreign texts. Raffel quotes Robert Lowell's preface to his book *Imitations*: "This book is separate from its sources, and should be read as a sequence, one voice running through many personalities, contrasts and repetitions … I have been reckless with literal meaning and labored hard to get the

tone … I have dropped lines, moved lines, moved stanzas, changed images and altered metre and intent." (Lowell 1962: xi-xiii). In a previous article, Raffel distinguished between Lowell's work as a poet and that of the true translator, who is "basically concerned with the re-creation of that text in the new language". Lowell, on the other hand, "tried to establish for himself what relationship that non-English writer had to *him:* he tried, bluntly, to use the non-English writer as a kind of quarry for his own poetry" (1980: 20).

Two friends

The use of four categories for analysing poetry translation is quite distinctive. Translation scholars are used to two categories, literal or free, beginning with Cicero (55BCE, Montgomery 33). They also recognise John Dryden's tripartite division (1680/ in Venuti 2000), The first is "metaphrase" ("turning an Author word by word, and line by line, from one Language into another" 38). The second is "paraphrase" ("Translation with Latitude, where the Author is kept in view by the Translator so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly follow'd as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not alter'd" 38). And the third is "imitation" ("where the Translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion: and taking up some general hints from the Original, to run division on the ground-work as he pleases" 38).

Holmes' essay recognises Dryden in a footnote (fn 8 31). It might argued that Holmes achieves four categories by dividing Dryden's metaphrase into two categories: one, source text oriented and two, target text and receiving literary culture oriented. Nevertheless, Holmes and Raffel's categories both follow these four divisions and others do not. The four categories can be summarised as follows:

(1) a formal approach, oriented towards the strict expression of the source text in its own terms;

(2) a roughly formal approach oriented towards target language readers and expressed in their own terms;

(3) a free approach that grows out of the ST in a fairly personal way in the target rewriting; and

(4) an approach that has apparently little respect for the integrity of the ST but uses it as the basis for the translator's own writing, and scarcely counts as "translation" at all.

These four categories are important for readers of poetry translations. Knowing what sort of a translation we are dealing with helps us to correctly predict its strengths and its weaknesses. Just as we would not condemn *Hamlet* (a tragedy) for not being funny (a comedy), so too it is difficult to criticise an academic translation for being literal and aesthetically unsatisfying. Or a freel translation as not being absolutely accurate. Each translation of a poem "can never be more than a single interpretation out of many of the original whose image it darkly mirrors" (Holmes 30). It is crucial to know what sort of an interpretation we are confronted with if we are to judge it correctly – and critics often do not. "I do not think many people know how to read a transled poem, or know what is a good and a bad translation" Raffel writes in *The Forked Tongue.* "Worse still. I think too many people who believe they do know how to read and evaluate translations – and are in a position, as critics and reviewers, to proclaim their beliefs publicly – are incredibly mistaken" (103).

If we accept that there is a close similarity between the two approaches, can we account for it in some way? Is it purely a coincidence? It would seem that Holmes and

Raffel were completely unrelated figures. Certainly, Francis Jones' detailed and groundbreaking article, "Biography as Network Building: James S. Holmes and Dutch-English Poetry Translation" (2018), makes no reference to Raffel as being part of Holmes' network of co-translators or other agents. Instead he suggests that Holmes had no co-translating network yet during the 1950s, because Holmes either worked solo or his co-translators could not be identified (320).

Nevertheless, despite the profusion of different places and languages in their biographies, there was indeed a point at which Holmes and Raffel worked together – for a few years at least. Surprisingly, the major point of contact for these two scholars and poets would appear to be their common reading of Indonesian literature. Holmes had another network – of co-translators, scholars, editors and publishers in the field of Indonesian Studies.

The initial interest in Indonesia for Holmes came through his life-long partner Hans van Marle (1922-2001), whom he first met in Amsterdam in October 1950. Van Marle's interest in Indonesia was very deep, going back to when one of his uncles had visited the family in 1933, presenting them with many cultural objects from the Dutch East Indies. In 1946, Van Marle himself travelled to Indonesia as a seaman on the steamship *Johan van Olden,* staying only for a period of ten days. The Indonesian Revolution for independence from the Netherlands had begun the previous year. Van Marle apparently sided with the newly emerging Republic, and Dr R.M. Soebandrio, Indonesian Ambassador to the Court of St James, urged him to transfer from the Faculty of Law to the Faculty for Political and Social Sciences in order to prepare himself to serve Indonesia from Europe. He did this through editing work in the first instance. Through contact with the eminent Indonesianist, Ruth McVey (who was also a Quaker), in Amsterdam in 1953, Hans was hired as a Research Associate for the Southeast Asian Program at Cornell University. In 1955, van Marle became Managing Editor for the series "Selected Studies on Indonesia by Dutch Scholars", published by the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam and funded with a grant by the Netherlands Organisation for Pure Research. Together, Van Marle and Holmes translated eight volumes in the series, the last in 1969. Van Marle eventually became a leading authority on the author Joseph Conrad, much of whose work is set in the Malay Archipelago (Boesan 2005).

Raffel spent two years on a Ford Foundation Fellowship teaching English in Indonesia, 1953 to 1955. He subsequently produced, with Nurdin Salam, an Indonesian colleague, a small volume of translation of selected poems by the great, bohemian Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar (1922-1949), published by New Directions, San Francisco in 1963. He also published *An Anthology of Modern Indonesian Poetry* in 1964 and a study of *The Development of Indonesian Poetry* in 1967.

It is not certain where, or if, the two met. Raffel was a prolific letter writer and may well have initiated contact that way, knowing of Holmes' interest in Indonesian literature ad his growing prominence in the translation of Dutch poetry. The contact is recognised in the words that Holmes "responded most generously" to Raffel's requests to him for help with the translations of the Dutch poetry included in *The Development of Indonesian Poetry* (Raffel 1967: viii). Much earlier, Holmes had also written the Preface to Raffel's translation of Chairil Anwar's *Selected Poems*, published in 1962, and is described on the back cover as "one of the leading authorities on Indonesian literature". (The Dutch scholar, A Teeuw, considers Holmes' Preface as "able" and "greatly enhances the book" 146.) Raffel's assessment of Holmes' knowledge may have been largely based upon the small number of articles on Indonesian literature by

Holmes, including "*Angkatan Muda*: A Checklist of Writings in Western Language Translation" (1951-2), "Modern Indonesian Prose: A total revolution" (1954) and "A Quarter Century of Indonesian Literature" (1955). In the *Development of Indonesian Poetry,* Raffel generously described these articles as "[p]erceptive, intelligent criticism" (Raffel 1967: 265). Clearly Holmes was exploring Indonesian literature during the 1950s but subsequently lost interest in it as he became completely committed to Dutch literature.

Jones' article, based on Dutch archives, dates Holmes' translation productivity from Dutch after 1954 and makes no place for the earlier work in Indonesian (2018: 310). The article thus further mistakes the reason for Holmes' low output from Dutch during the late fifties and mid-1960s (2018: 316). This gap in Holmes' productivity may have been due, in part at least, to this being the period when Holmes most had ongoing contact with Dutch and indigenous scholarship on Indonesia, as well as with Raffel and through him with Indonesian poetry. The connection between Holmes and Raffel is so out of key with Jones' focus on "Dutch-English Poetry Translation" that it was overlooked in the description of Holmes' biography and Raffel was excluded from Holmes' network – and vica versa, of course. The connection is naturally much more important for scholars of Indonesian literature.

If the fourfold schema was a shared intellectual discovery, there is no acknowledgement by either Holmes or Raffel of who was the earlier theorist. It does seem likely that Holmes' categories (published in 1970) came earlier than Raffel's (1981), and that as the four ways became common to both their ways of thinking, they assumed these slightly different forms over time, emphasising form and audience respectively. Holmes seems to have been a more rigorous thinker than Raffel, as his essay "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" (1972/ 2005) showed: it would be appropriate for him to focus on the abstract quality of form. Raffel was more passionately committed to his own poetry and this too shows in his emphasis on audience responses to writing.

If this similarity of understanding is admitted, we may remember what Dryden wrote of Sir John Denham and Mr Cowley, "As they were friends, they communicated their thoughts on this subject to each other; and therefore their reasons for it are little different, though the practice of one was more moderate" (Preface to *Ovid's Epistles,* Robinson 173). Ultimately, which one was the more moderate in his life, translation and scholarship, is difficult to decide.

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