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Making Classics New

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Abstract

This article discusses issues concerning the re-translation of classics, with particular reference to four Japanese classics the author has translated for Penguin, including *The Pillow Book* (10th century) and *Kokoro* and *Kusamakura* (early 20th century).

I've recently been reading Peter Carey's novel, *Parrot and Olivier in America*. Carey does voice extremely well, and I've always felt that one of the more creative aspects of translation is the creation of "voice". In Carey's book, there are two quite dissonant first person voices that take turns to relate the story, which is based on Tocqueville's travels in America in the 1830s. The Tocqueville character, Olivier, speaks (or rather writes, since this purports to be his journal) in an elaborately literary style, startlingly alien in a modern novel. Parrot is much more lively and full of vivid vernacular, and is a fine example of the way Carey can create a voice that belongs uniquely to a character, doesn't feel out of place in its historical moment, but also feels somehow immensely modern. But it was the Tocqueville character that intrigued me, because here Carey seemed to be deliberately parroting, as it were, a tone that would strike a modern reader as "classical".

In fact it's much more complex than that, of course. His carefully ornate and old-fashioned style isn't just crude historical pastiche, but defines the character of Olivier himself in quite crucial ways. But I was intrigued to read a review of the novel in the *London Review of Books* that pointed out just how close to pastiche Olivier's voice is, and how relatively thin this makes the Olivier character. The review, by Nicholas Spice, said several things in passing that startled me. He pointed out that a surprising amount of Olivier's description and observation echoes quite closely passages in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* — but of course Carey has relied on the English translation of this work, so the voice is at a double remove. And Spice went on to say, in partial explanation of the odd thinness or emptiness of Olivier's voice: "However good the translation, there's always something rootless and linguistically indeterminate about translated language." Carey was borrowing, he suggests, from a version of Tocqueville that had already been somehow, necessarily, emptied out via translation.

Something in me very much doesn't want to acknowledge that this might be true — which means, of course, that I have to acknowledge that to some extent it probably is. But it's another of Spice's passing observations that I want to focus on here, this one so passing that it's a mere aside in brackets. In the novel, a substantial chunk of Tocqueville's notes are quoted verbatim, and Spice is cross that the quotation is from the later Wilson Pierson translation rather than that by Francis Lieber published in 1938 — "earlier," he says, "and therefore, one might have thought, a better source." He acknowledges elsewhere that both are "perfectly serviceable renderings" (damning with rather faint praise) and that "the differences aren't great". So what on earth can he mean? It could only be that a translator working in the 1930s was seventy odd years closer than the new translator to the English that would have been equivalent to Tocqueville's 1830s French, and therefore is more to be trusted to get the voice right.

This astonishing aside points to something that frequently haunts translators of earlier works — the huge question of voice, and how to translate voice not just across languages and cultures but across time. More importantly, it throws up the whole question of the unconscious assumptions readers make about translations of the classics, and about their retranslations.

It's extremely rare, perhaps impossible, for a modern translator of something designated as a "classic" to be the first to translate it. The current theory seems to be that a classic ideally needs a new translation every fifty years or so. When you're commissioned to do a new translation, what exactly are you being asked to provide?

The ideal situation, of course, is when you're dealing with a classic that's old enough to allow scholars to wrangle over it. You can be fairly sure that after fifty years there'll be new interpretations that will allow you to produce something genuinely different from previous translations. Or, if you're very lucky, you'll be working with something that has been poorly served by its previous translators. If possible, it's nice at least to tell yourself this is so, whether it is or not. It's very daunting to be faced with providing a new version of something whose previous translation you've always admired. But assuming that your classic is straightforward and free of textual choices that would allow you to produce something new, and that the previous translation or translations are a lot better than the dread word "serviceable", why the need for a new translation? What exactly are you being asked to make new?

In many ways the question is a silly one, of course. Every translation is different, and there's nothing to prevent yours from being just as good as the previous very good one, in different ways. A classic has generally attained its status because it's a fine literary work, and this means that it allows for all manner of subtle choices in its reading and rendering. But there's also something going on inside the assumptions of the need for retranslation which is about updating, and this is where the difficulties arise.

The slow drift of language generally means that after fifty years a translation will probably feel slightly old-fashioned. Anyone translating a contemporary work from another language will naturally make it contemporary, of course. What about a work written fifty years ago? I'd guess that, all things being equal, most translators would do the same thing — silently, perhaps even unthinkingly, make it contemporary. After all, it would do the author a sad disservice to make her come across as at all stuffily old-fashioned. What of something a hundred years old? Here we begin to get into difficulties. After a century, not only language but social mores and indeed everyday life itself have undergone considerable changes, such that conveying it all in our contemporary English can often seem rather jarring. This is particularly true of dialogue, of course, which is always acutely sensitive to register problems, but to a lesser extent it influences choices we make about the prose in general.

This came home to me when I translated an early modern Japanese classic by Natsume Soseki, *Kokoro*, written in 1914. Glancing at the previous translation, made about fifty years ago, I registered how old-fashioned it seemed. Old-fashioned to me, of course, not to the translator, who hadn't hesitated to make the novel read like a contemporary work. Well I can do better than *that*, I thought happily. But what I discovered as I worked was that in fact it was harder rather than easier to render the novel in natural contemporary English. Contemporary language would have set up expectations deeply at odds with the style, the themes, the whole substance of the novel. It kept wanting to be in a subtly almost Edwardian English (an English that might well have struck the previous translator as stuffily old-fashioned). So that, in the end, is how I translated it.

Something had happened in the intervening fifty years. Back then, *Kokoro* was an important novel that deserved to be kept alive. Now, fifty years later, it's worthy of appearing in the Penguin Classics list. Translating it brought home to me some of the complexities lurking behind the need to "update".

So much for the relatively recent past. But what happens as a work gets more remote from us in time? Once it's achieved accepted classic status, certain expectations and assumptions settle

on it that can bedevil a translator who wants, or is required to, "make it new". There's a language deemed appropriate to the classic, a heightened lexical register that readers expect, and they're often disgruntled when they don't get it. It evolves over time, I think roughly a century or two behind the contemporary language. 150 years ago Matthew Arnold, who demanded his Homer be plain and direct, quotes approvingly a translation that strikes us today as impossibly archaic and convoluted (*On Translating Homer*, 1861). This in his day was what he deemed language suitable to the classics. Today, our idea of such language is probably a version of the sort of language Arnold himself wrote. It gives you pause to consider that in 2150 there may well be reverent translations of the timeless classics that make them sound like our contemporary English.

But the dilemma is a real one. *Kokoro* is a hundred years old, so modified Edwardian works perfectly for it. What of something two hundred years old, or five, or ten? It goes without saying that we can't possibly translate it into the equivalent English of its day. Does this then liberate us to ignore the whole question and make it simply modern?

I faced this question with the first classic I translated, back when I was too naive to recognize that there was a question at all. The work was the tenth-century Japanese classic known as *The Pillow Book*, a kind of journal of anecdotes and observations written by Sei Shonagon, a gentlewoman at the empress's court. I was overawed by this commission, partly because of the work's difficulty, and partly because of my admiration for the previous translation done by Ivan Morris in the 1960s (*The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*). Sometimes a previous translation has attained a kind of classic status in itself, and any attempt to update it feels to readers about as sacrilegious as updating Chaucer or Shakespeare. The translation and the work are one. The Morris translation didn't have quite this status, but it was close. The only way I could dare to proceed was by finding my old copy of it and putting it right at the back of a cupboard and metaphorically locking the door on it. If I'd had it beside me when I was working, I would have been paralyzed.

I began with the unthinking attitude of reverence due to a classic. This worked quite well for the famous opening section, a poetic evocation of the different times of day and their appropriate seasons. But within a few pages, I began to have my doubts, largely because Sei Shonagon apparently did too. She could do poetic when she chose, but her style is overwhelmingly that of a forthright, rather down-to-earth woman who gets immense pleasure from the world around her and charms you by assuming you do too. It didn't take me long to decide that it was this direct and at times quite pithy voice that I wanted to bring across, freed of all the reverence due to a hallowed classic, so I didn't hesitate in the end to make her quite modern.

The work I'm presently engaged on throws an interesting new perspective on this question of choice of register. It belongs to three centuries later, a time that already looked back with deep nostalgia to the high culture of Sei Shonagon's day. What's more, the author, Yoshida Kenko, a somewhat conservative and traditionalist *littérateur*, is particularly susceptible to worship of this former age, and this is often reflected in rather old-fashioned language. What was up-to-the-minute contemporary language in Sei Shonagon's day had become three centuries later the epitome of classic elegance. Kenko wrote a journal consciously styled after *The Pillow Book*, and he would have been most offended if I didn't give his prose a touch of refinement. But it has provided me with an interesting dilemma. I'm sometimes faced with the problem of having to translate a sentence or whole passage that closely follows one in *The Pillow Book*. There, I gave it an unselfconsciously contemporary tone, but for Kenko three centuries later, these same words trail clouds of classic nobility. "Look, isn't that a beautiful flower," for him sounds something like "Behold yon beauteous bloom." Such are the pitfalls of classical translation.

Of course problems of voice and register, even within our own contemporary language, are far more complex than I've indicated here, and many internal factors besides the work's age and status as a classic can affect the translator's decisions. Yet the fact that what you're translating is a classic inevitably brings with it a little swarm of assumptions, expectations and conundrums that hover and nag as you work. I hope I've managed to elucidate a few of them.

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