

Notes of a translator



For the past year I have had the good fortune to legitimately engross myself in what is to me the most compelling of novels, translating Hilary Mantel's *Bring up the Bodies*, the sequel to 2009 Booker Prize Winner *Wolf Hall*. The most compelling novels do have a habit of providing ample scope for research, leading you on winding paths outside the pages of the book in order to know what exactly an author is alluding at and how to best convey it in the target language. And though a great deal can be found on the Internet, some particularities will remain obscure: No virtual tour will give you a clear view of roof constructions, palace kitchens, gates or stabling facilities. Which hardly ever presents problems; descriptions usually allow for general wordings. *Bring up the Bodies*, or rather its protagonist Cromwell, does not. By the time I started grumbling about the 'preposterous lack of information on the Internet', I thought it best to go over and have a look myself, and if possible, to discuss everything that still puzzled me about the text with Ms Mantel. So I (timidly but hopefully) applied to the Dutch Foundation of Literature for a travel grant, which met with generous approval.

Visit

During my visit with Hilary, my curiosity got the better of me – but I suddenly realise it may sound strange that a not altogether inexperienced translator English-Dutch, having access to a heap of dictionaries and other resources, should need the cooperation of someone who hardly knows a word of Dutch. In case it does (sound strange), let me give you a general idea of the sort of query that makes up a translator's list:

On your way, phantom: his [Cromwell's] mind brushes it before him; *who can understand Wyatt, who absolve him?*

The grammatical construction of 'who can understand Wyatt, who absolve him?' suggests the second 'who' to be identical to the first, and 'him' to be Wyatt. Which would plead for 'absolve' to point to the Dutch meaning of (Catholic) absolution, forgiveness. But. It is only a suggestion. The

grammatical construction can be read differently: yes, the second 'who' will be identical to the first, but 'him' could just as easily refer to Cromwell. And if that is the case, 'absolve' could just take on a completely different Dutch meaning, that of 'releasing someone from his/her responsibility'. The context allows for both interpretations. Thomas Cromwell has been asked by Wyatt's father to look out for Wyatt, a request he, Cromwell, takes very seriously. He feels the responsibilities of a father towards Wyatt. At which point, you will understand, I really, really needed Hilary to tell me who is 'him'.

Jelly dishes

Back to Hilary, then. ('Him is Wyatt, and the meaning should be that of (Catholic) absolution.') She had just shown me an anecdotic bit of history from Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, where in 1510 Cromwell is bid to pave the way to the Pope's court for a guild delegation on the mighty quest of obtaining the renewal of two 'pardons' (dispensations perhaps from Lenten austerities or some such) from Pope Julius II. Knowing 'how the Pope's holy tooth greatly delighted to new fangled strange delicates', it came to his, Cromwell's, mind to prepare jelly dishes. Accompanied by English music, jelly dishes in hand, he advanced on the Pope, who in his delight stamped both pardons 'without any adoe'.

It made me marvel about two things: on the one hand the way she had taken the story and deducted from it pieces of the puzzle that is Cromwell's (early, personal) life, and constructed a highly credible, even perfectly likely version of events; his speaking Italian, his knowing his way to the Pope's court, his being asked by a trade delegation to intervene on their behalf, his knowing how to prepare jelly dishes 'after the best fashion' and how that must have come to be. And on the other hand the intimate glimpse she gave me of her writer's reality, the keen awareness with which she has to evaluate tidbits of information, the meticulous care with which she constructs a whole fictional world, using every tool available, be they textual (grammatical tense, focalisation) or more cultural (references to other texts, pointers to a collective memory, to shared customs and eccentricities). It felt like getting a wonderful present, because it was beyond what we had set out to do, which was no more than to solve a few queries.

Translator's reality

In return I talked of a translator's reality, the translator's fascination with solving the clash of two bodies of decidedly different conventions, breaking down both bit by bit, investigating and comparing each bit in order to reconstruct as well as can possibly be the original fictional world, so it can be opened and lived in by another audience.

But I am not very good at expressing the things that move me deepest, not in spoken words, not when they have to be spoken on the spot, with thoughts racing ahead and getting into a hopeless tumble. I wondered if I had been clear at all. Most of all I wondered what it meant to her, having her reality cross that of the translator. Would she in fact prefer *not* to be involved when her work goes across borders and starts an adventurous (or downright perilous) new life? On this occasion it would certainly have spared her the headache of a thousand questions, let alone the time spent to

explain what on occasion must have seemed quite obvious to herself. What would any writer want from his/her translator in an ideal world?

As I said, my curiosity got the better of me, so in the end I just went ahead and asked. And Hilary being Hilary, she responded readily and wholeheartedly with an essayish piece on author-translator collaboration. If I dare, I think I will ask other writers too.