

Poetics and Translation Studies

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I am not, I suspect, the most reliable commentator on what I take to be my “special fields,” poetics and translation studies. As I understand oral tradition, it is deeply rooted in what might be called the actualities of the literary experience—that is, the actual processes by which, over the centuries, oral traditions are both expressed and appreciated. The profound interconnectedness of artist expression and listener appreciation can never be denied in dealing with oral traditions. The dominant thrust of virtually all recent literary studies, however, is to theorize expression and degrade appreciation. “If everyone is somebody,” said W. S. Gilbert, in *The Gondoliers*, “than no one’s anybody.” If we say that the writer is a philosopher is a scientist is a psychologist is an anthropologist is a priest, and so on, then writers are nothing, and their art is a matter of total indifference. And if the nature of art is thus degraded, it is not hard to understand why normative distinctions are not being made in the appreciation of art.

Let me use a very small part of both poetics and translation studies as an example: prosody. Systems of controlled musicality, in all languages, are as irreducibly demonstrable as systems of controlled musicality in music proper. Musicians and musicologists theorize, of course. But they are inevitably grounded in the organization and production of sound, which simply cannot be either ignored or transcended. Prosodists, on the other hand, feel free to proclaim that Chaucer’s prosody—unlike that of the language in which he wrote—was not stress-based but syllable-based, though English is utterly incapable of organizing verbal expression on such a basis.

And translators, as well as those who write about translation, all too often persist in the practice of equating the system of controlled musicality developed in one language with that developed by a very different language. We extend such nonsensical practices even so far as end-rhyme, though any serious student knows that the end-rhyme capacities of languages are enormously different and cannot be blindly equated. Reductionism simply

does not operate in these matters, any more than it does, say, in popular sports. Mister A can and does throw a ball further than Mister B. And differently.

It may well be that, for broad literary success, oral tradition studies are *too* vitally concerned with, and dependent upon, grounded realities. These days, we like our literary studies spread with both hands, to the treetops and the skies. At least as I know it, oral tradition operates, and is understood to operate, with four wheels on the ground and both eyes on the road.

These must be understood as my own opinions, for which neither *Oral Tradition* nor academia itself can be held responsible.

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