

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SCOTS AND ITS ACCENTS IN CONTEMPORARY SCOTTISH LITERATURE, AND ITS REFLECTION IN TRANSLATION

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The aim of this article is to address the question why so many significant contemporary Scottish writers do not enjoy the same reknown outside the English-speaking world, specifically in Poland, as they do at home. Are they marginalised because of the linguistic forms they adopt in their works, which pose additional hurdles to any prospective translator, or are there other issues involved? Why is Irvine Welsh, for example, translated¹ while the founding father of the new generation of Scottish writers, Tom Leonard, or the Booker Prize Winner James Kelman are completely unknown to non-English speaking Polish readers?² The same can be said for one of the leading Scottish playwrights and poets of the day, Liz Lochhead.

Although Scottish writing is flourishing in a variety of genres and forms, I have chosen only to present here these four writers: first, because they are of the same generation and have had a great influence on subsequent Scottish writing, second, because through the adoption of their

specific choice of linguistic form they transfer a common message, that is both highly political and national, as well as being characteristically social. All pose translation problems, although the fact that Welsh has been translated into Polish, while the other three have not, points on the one hand, to certain translation solutions that can be found more easily than others, while on the other, to a contemporary readership that appears to want and is ready to accept both the topics touched upon in his novels as well as the language Welsh consistently uses in his writing. The publishing market, of course, is always ready to meet demands and knows what will supposedly sell well.

Also the fact that I have chosen those very two poems: 'right inuff' by Tom Leonard and 'Kidspoem/Bairnsang' by Liz Lochhead as examples³, is hardly accidental. Both, though written over a timespan of probably about twenty years (no exact information has been provided concerning when exactly the poems were written)⁴ point not only to a common

¹ To date four of his novels have been translated into Polish.

² James Kelman has, however, been translated into other languages: French, German, Dutch, Norwegian and Spanish.

³ See Appendix for the complete poems.

⁴ An interesting point here is that Liz Lochhead's collection of poetry that includes 'Kidspoem/Bairnsang' was dedicated, among others, to Tom Leonard.

theme but also to a political issue going back three hundred years, which is obviously of great concern to the writers in question. The issue of language, one's native language and the status that language enjoys – or does not enjoy – is highly significant to the position it holds within the native culture and the acknowledgment it receives – or does not receive – both within and beyond it.

“From the perspective of English speakers and of English culture, Scots”, according to Cairns Craig, “is a language of leftovers, the detritus of proper speech and good writing, a supplement poisonous to the health of the real language of its society, ‘thi/lanwij a/thi guhtr’ as Tom Leonard transliterates it” (1999: 76).⁵ The additional problem is that the Glaswegian Leonard speaks and is advocating in much of his poetry is, as he says, not even acknowledged by the Scottish National Dictionary. It is often treated both by native Scots and linguists alike as a bastardised form of English – in contrast to the Doric of the north-eastern region of Scotland, for example, or other rural varieties – mainly because of strong immigrant influence and the fact that it has no acknowledged written form. Without going into the history of the Glasgow variety of Scots, it is highly significant that such writers as Leonard and Kelman⁶ have shown the world that it is possible to present, through literary means, how people speak in that large city of Scotland and that this speech is an inseparable

part of the culture of the city's inhabitants. Although ‘right inuff / ma language is disgraceful’, as Leonard says, ‘all livin language is sacred’ (emphasis mine). And it is for this language and the people who speak it that he is demanding respect. It is both a very obvious political and social manifesto – the two being irretrievably entwined – by one of the most radical representatives of literary Glasgow of the last few decades.⁷

Leonard's manifesto uses his own form of phonetic transcription to express the Glasgow speaking voice, with all its genuine truthfulness, humour and terseness of expression. It is also a strong expression of the poet's juxtaposition with English and its ‘received pronunciation’, which has for so long been the language of power. His conscious adoption of the scorned ‘urban dialect’ for much of his writing is both an exploration into these linguistic relationships and an expression of solidarity with the socially and economically dispossessed of the city of Glasgow.

Liz Lochhead's ‘Kispoe/Bairnsang’, from her 2003 collection of poetry, and the first to appear in over a decade, is more autobiographical in nature and, what, in some respects could be treated as touching upon a historical theme, emphasises the Scottish Educational Department's insistence on teaching children the use of what was generally described as ‘proper English’. It has to be admitted that today attitude towards dialects and regional accents have changed somewhat over the last decade or so. They are not stigmatised as much as they used to be and it

⁵ Tom Leonard quoted from ‘Unrelated Incidents’ in *Intimate Voices. Selected Work 1965–1983*, London: Vintage, 1995, p. 86.

⁶ Although not discussed here, it is necessary to include Anne Donovan, with her recently published novel *BuddhaDa* (2003), which has been written throughout in Glaswegian, her spelling forms being based in many cases more on traditional Scots than anything we can find in Leonard's poetry.

⁷ The Glasgow idiom was first introduced by Ian Hamilton Finlay in *Glasgow Beasts* (1961). Besides Tom Leonard, the significant contribution of Stephen Mulrine and Alan Spence must also be remembered here (cf. Wood in Craig, ed. 1988: 345).

is even politically incorrect to insist people reject their linguistic identities for a form that is intrinsically alien to them. This, however, was not the case in the not so distant past.⁸

Both writers in these two poems are presenting not only an extremely important Scottish issue but a problem that has touched many countries and nations in the world. We do not have to go very far to recall historical periods where native languages were marginalised or even banned in favour of the language of the coloniser, aggressor or dictator government. Those in power have always had the means to enforce the central language and its culture on the weak and defeated. The same mechanism is at work as far as one's position in society is concerned. The higher up the social ladder, the more one is expected to adopt the standards of those in power, automatically becoming more powerful oneself in relation to those standing on a lower rung of the same ladder. This social position is of course also strictly linked to how one speaks.

How can we then bring this seemingly international problem, but exemplified by the Scottish situation as presented by Tom Leonard and Liz Lochhead, to a readership outside the English/Scottish speaking world? Is translation at all possible? Is the fact that these two

leading authors have not been translated into Polish (and I presume many other languages as well, even when they write in Standard English) because translation does not bend easily – or not at all – to localisation and to the use of different dialects/varieties of a language within one literary work? However, because Leonard does in fact adopt one consistent form throughout his poem, there is the possibility to translate it into the standard form of any other language as long as it is stated very clearly that the work was translated from Glaswegian and not from English. Otherwise, the political significance of Leonard's message would make no sense whatsoever.

Liz Lochhead, on the other hand, is using two dialects of two different languages within one poem to make a very important political point. To anybody who knows anything about the history of English and Scots, as well as of England and Scotland, and the position of these languages and their varieties in society will understand this immediately. It is obviously much more difficult, or even impossible, for those who are not acquainted with the subject at all. The culture-specificity of both the content and form of this poem is such that even if translated into two related languages with a related political history, like Polish and Russian for example, would deprive it of its geographical position. The use of Polish and Russian or Polish and Silesian, or Kashubian for that matter, would automatically change the geographical locality as well as the political and historical associations the target readers would have. However, even if we were to admit untranslatability in reference to such poems because of the above mentioned associations, this still does not quite answer the question why many other works by Liz Lochhead, who is generally more universal in subject matter and usually chooses Standard English for her

⁸ It is enough to go back twelve years to the heated debate and extremely strong criticism addressed to James Kelman and his *How Late it Was, How Late* when it won the Booker Prize in 1994. The insults ranged from Professor Andrew Noble – a great promoter of Robert Burns's work – comparing “the Booker award to the morbid fascination of the eighteenth-century English press with reports of Scots soldiers' leaving their English billets littered with excrement” (in: Pitchford; 2000: 713) to Gerald Warner from *The Times* who accuses Kelman of provincialism and goes on to state that: “Today's preoccupation with gutter themes and milieus is a symptom of cultural degeneracy” (ibid.: 210). See footnote no. 10 below for further discussion on the subject.

writing, seems to be shunned by publishers. This, of course, also applies to Leonard, whether he is writing in his form of Glaswegian or in Standard English. Are they too political and socially oriented, with all their references to the complexities of the contemporary world, especially their own social milieu which they treat as a starting point? Are they also too alien and too much of a risky business when it comes to commissioning translation for publication?

Moving from poetry to prose, it was James Kelman's novel *How Late it Was, How Late*, published in 1994, and awarded the prestigious Booker Prize, that finally brought him recognition outside Scotland (in America he was actually first published in 1973). Not all the judges, however, were unanimous in their opinion. Rabbi Julia Neuberger voted forcefully against him, becoming highly emotional in the insults and strong criticism she hurled at Kelman at the time. "The novel was denounced as 'monotonously foul-mouthed', 'unreadably bad', 'indigestible crap' and [the main character, Sammy, was compared to] 'a drunken Scotsman railing against bureaucracy'" (in: Pitchford; 2000: 701). Kelman revelled at the time in his "outsider image, consistently foregrounding his working-class background, his radical leftism, and his support for the Scottish nationalist movement" (ibid.). He obviously did not belong to those London Booker Prize circles, but because of and thanks to the controversy around the award, both Kelman and Scottish literature in general finally came to the attention of many who had previously simply preferred not to know.

Kelman, one of the famous Glasgow trio who have had such an impact on putting Scottish literature onto the map of the British literary world (together with Tom Leonard and Alasdair Gray), is unusually aware of the social ills of society, the life of the under-

privileged, the alienated, the dispossessed and those on the fringe of society. He can be described as a socio-politically minded writer whose anger at the whole spectrum of social and racial inequality is revealed in his short stories and novels, and not only in his Booker Prize win.⁹ They give us glimpses, or sometimes even much larger images, of the world surrounding him.

In his last novel *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004), an excerpt of which can be found in the Appendix, we are confronted with a highly loaded and explosively ironic political critique of the world's superpower, and its highly exaggerated security system introduced after September 11. This is intertwined with an extremely acute psychological analysis of the issue of alienation. The impact of course is all the more powerful due to Kelman's choice of style and linguistic forms.

You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free is a 437-page interior monologue of a Glaswegian drinking the evening away in an American bar before his flight 'home' to 'bonné Skallin' for a month's holiday after being away for twelve years. We learn about those twelve years, the living, loving, working and struggling, gambling and drinking, the uncertainties and failures of his existence in this land of contradictions. The work is both moving and angry, sometimes even very angry. We are faced with Kelman's ability to show the positive in man, in the humankind generally, but we are also faced with his anger at the power generated by authority and bureaucracy, and people's helplessness when confronted with the latter. A whole range of emotions can be observed

⁹ It is also necessary to mention here his essays collected under the title "*And the Judges said ...*", published by Vintage, 2003.

through the language Kelman employs, language that is both strongly expressive and clearly points to the main character's place of birth. It also points to Kelman's national identity and to his language, which are of primary importance to him.¹⁰

When he speaks or writes about himself, he has always emphasised the fact that although his language is English, the accent in his writing is Glasgow, and that he is a citizen of that city. It is Glasgow and the fact that he is a native of Glasgow that is of primary importance, much more so than his being a native of Scotland. It was also in his acceptance speech for the Booker Prize, which in itself raised even more controversy, that he spoke about his culture and his language having a right to exist and that no one has the authority to dismiss that right.

It is this integrity of language and culture, and its right to exist, no matter the form it may take or how it is presented to the outside world, that is of significance. It is not only Kelman's culture and language (with the Glasgow accent) that is reflected in the narrator's monologue, but how language – in this case different Englishes – is presented to the reader and how these Englishes, with their representations of appropriate accents written in Kelman's own form of phonetic transcription, make up the story of the novel. In the excerpt provided, the narrator and main character, Jeremiah Brown, is recalling an incident when, being employed in the American Security Services,

¹⁰ In his Booker Prize acceptance speech, Kelman was quick to deny English cultural imperialism and in answer to all the above mentioned criticism concerning what he wrote and how he wrote he said: "If the language is taboo, the people are taboo. A culture can't exist without the language of the culture." (qtd. by Pitchford; op.cit.: 702 after Warner; op.cit.) See also: Lesley McDowell, "James Kelman: Look back in anger" in *The Independent*, 21 May 2004.

he came across a team of upper-class Englishmen, pretending to be somebody totally different, in the "upper-echelons of US federal security" (p. 224). His surprise at the encounter is enhanced by Kelman's emphasis on accents, and how very important they are – both from the political and social point of view – in the English-speaking world. It is those speech forms, as presented by Kelman, that are a reflection of what is most relevant to the story. The narration and how it is presented to the reader are inseparable. Here this concerns the form, together with all the different accents. In this case it is Glaswegian and Glaswegian presented with an American accent when the narrator is imitating the speech of the natives of his host country, the upper-class English accent, and the American working-class east-coast accent. So many accents in this one short passage and all of them absolutely essential to the story. Every word in Kelman's work is there for a reason, every accent has its own purpose.

Is this why he is not translated? Or is it his political message and strong criticism of the way different societies are run that may be inconvenient for some publishers? If a political issue is of significance to the leading policies of a given country or part of the world, then works dealing with the theme are more likely to be translated abroad. This applies even if it is known from the start that the reading public will probably be limited to a small group of the intellectual *élite*. The decision to commission a translation is not only a matter of supply and demand governed by market economy but is more often than not politically empowered and is based on what happens to be in vogue at a given moment in time. Although this definitely does not apply in Scotland where Kelman is a well-known figure, albeit not always liked for his style of writing, lack of

plots and bad language, he appears to be present only for those members of the intellectual *élite* outside English-speaking countries who are primarily able to read him in the original. Kelman's "fundamental commitment to realism in language and content" (Craig; 1999: 100) and his presentation of that realism through his characters' voices and his refusal to compromise with traditional orthographies does not in fact mean that he is untranslatable. He is translatable, although it must be admitted that the orthographic variations in accents will unfortunately be lost.¹¹

As can be seen, James Kelman's emphasis on reflecting the speaking voice in his writing paved the way for breaking all manners of language barriers, although of course this has been perceived by some to be to the detriment of Scottish literature. To quote Moira Burgess: "he used more gutter obscenities than anyone else. Now, others have caught up with him and strive to surpass his total. Irvine Welsh is the new champion ..." (1998: 310).

As the above discussion has shown, it is, however, the younger of the two who, thanks to translation, has become the better-known writer in certain parts of the world. Is it only because of the film adaptation of his first novel *Trainspotting* (1993)? In reference to this literary debut, Cairns Craig, in *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*, writes, among others, that:

Welsh constructs a narrative which is not simply a response to the problems of the 'chemical

generation' but is the recapitulation of the confrontations of the fearful that have been a defining characteristic of the modern Scottish imagination. (Craig; 1999: 56)

All very true, but is it this highly significant psychological aspect of the novel that attracts the imagination of the average reader? Is this really why publishers commission translations of his novels? If we are to look at it from the Polish perspective, it is **primarily** Welsh's account of the life of the 'chemical generation', with all its problems, traumas, and undoubtedly the fearful as well, that is of interest and attracts the reader, and not the 'defining characteristic of the modern Scottish imagination'.

Without going into a detailed analysis of reader response, it is enough to look at how the Polish translator managed to deprive the work of its Scottishness. Deciding the dialect was untranslatable, he placed emphasis on the social and personal degeneration of Welsh's protagonist. In his afterward, he explains that what was most important for him was to try and find a key to the door of Mark Renton's world. This key, according to the translator, "was the breaking down of language, a decomposition answering to the emotional and physical degeneration of the character. And this is why we once find Renton speaking very correct Standard Polish, and at other times his Polish is terrible" (Polak in Welsh; 1997: 303 – translation mine). What is meant by 'terrible' here are obscenities that are in actual fact worse and more varied than in the original, and a Polish that hinges on certain regional dialects, contemporary slang, and sheer linguistic carelessness, which is evident in many people's speech, no matter their education or social background. According to the translator's interpretation of the work, he believes the use of the Leith variety of Scots – also transcribed phonetically by Welsh – and characteristic of

¹¹ See the translation suggestions in my articles: "Translating the Translated: On the Complexities of James Kelman's *Translated Accounts. A Novel*", Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego and "James Kelman's *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*: Relevance Theory and National Identity in Translation", Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, both in press.

the urban working-class of that part of Scotland, together with all the obscenities, swear words, etc, used by the novel's characters in abundance, is a reflection of their degradation, especially that of Renton, and is manifested through the semantic and syntactical breaking down of language.

Although we may agree that Welsh's characters inhabit the same fragmented linguistic community that Kelman's narrators do, which indeed mirrors their own inner fragmentation (cf. Craig; 1999: 100), and that the dialect in *Trainspotting* is "like the empty shell of Leith Central station where it is impossible now to

spot trains" (ibid: 97), it points rather to the traditional Scottish working-class and the breakdown of a certain world. This, unfortunately, is absolutely lost in translation, but then again this is not what would sell and not what the general reader outside Scotland is unduly concerned about. Foregrounding 'Junk dilemmas'¹² and the use of as many obscenities as possible – and in this way breaking down traditional language barriers – is what seems to be a guarantee of world-wide recognition and not what actually concerned Welsh in the first place.

¹² See I. Welsh in the Appendix.

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1. Tom Leonard (b. 1944)

right inuff
 ma language is disgraceful

ma maw tellt mi
 ma teacher tellt mi
 the doactir tellt mi
 the priest tellt mi

ma boss tellt mi
 ma landlady in carrington street tellt mi
 thi lassie ah tried tay get aff way in 1969 tellt mi
 sum wee smout thit thoat ah hudny read chomsky tellt mi
 a calvinistic communist thit thoat ah wuz revisionist tellt mi

po-faced literati grimly kerryin thi burden a thi past tellt mi
 po-faced literati grimly kerryin thi burden a thi future tellt mi
 ma wife tellt mi jist-tay-get-inty-this-poem tellt mi
 ma wainz came hame fray school an tellt mi
 jist about ivry book ah oapnd tellt mi
 even thi introduction tay thi Scottish National Dictionary tellt mi

ach well
 all livin language is sacred
 fuck thi lohta thim

Intimate Voices. Selected Work 1965–1983,
 London: Vintage, 1995

2. James Kelman (b. 1946)

Ah but lads, I says, it is a supreme pleasure to hear ye oldé upper-class Inkliz voaice mimicking a working-class east-coast accent; I canna mind the last time I heard it in the flesh. This is a big occasion for me and I'll go hame and boast about it to my wife and kids. And I must also tell ye, see your true accents – and I speak as a Scarrisch chap – see yer true accents, I says, I would agree with them media surveys that tell us that that selfsame accent is the one and only thing a true Brit misses while sunning himself in summer climes. I include myself in that and I think I can speak for the rest of the world.

You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free, London: Penguin Books, 2005, p.225

3. Liz Lochhead (b. 1947)

Kidspoem/Bairnsang

it wis January
and a grey dreich day
the first day Ah went to the school
so my Mum happed me up in ma
good navy-blue napp coat wi the red tartan hood
birlled a scarf aroon ma neck
pu'ed oan ma pixie an' my pawkies
it wis that bitter
said *noo ye'll no starve*
gie'd me a wee kiss and a kid-oan skelp oan the bum
and sent me aff across the playground
tae the place Ah'd learn to say
it was January
and a really dismal day
the first day I went to school
so my mother wrapped me up in my
best navy-blue top coat with the red tartan hood,
twirled a scarf around my neck,
pulled on my bobble-hat and mittens
it was so bitterly cold
said *now you won't freeze to death*
gave me a little kiss and a pretend slap on the bottom
and sent me off across the playground
to the place I'd learn to forget to say
it wis January
and a grey dreich day
the first day Ah went to the school
so my Mum happed me up in ma
good navy-blue napp coat wi the rid tartan hood,
birlled a scarf aroon ma neck,
pu'ed oan ma pixie an' ma pawkies
it wis that bitter.

Oh saying it was one thing
but when it came to writing it
in black and white
the way it had to be said
was as if you were posh, grown-up, male, English and dead.

The Colour of Black & White. Poems 1984-2003,
Edinburgh: Polygon, 2003

4. Irvine Welsh (b. 1958)

Junk Dilemmas No. 65

Suddenly it's cauld; very fuckin cauld. The candle's nearly melted doon. The only real light is comin from the telly. Something black and white's on ... but the telly's a black and white set so it was bound tae be something black and white ... wi a colour telly, it wid be different ... perhaps.

It's freezing, but movement only makes ye caulder; by making ye more aware that there's fuck all you can do, fuck all ye can really do, tae get warm. At least if ah stey still an can pretend to masel ah have the power tae make masel warm, by just moving aroond or switching the fire oon. The trick is tae be as still as possible. It's easier than dragging yourself across the flair tae switch that fuckin fire oan.

Somebody else is in the room wi us. It's Spud, ah think. It's hard tae tell in the dark.

— Spud ... Spud ...

He sais nothing.

— It's really fuckin cauld man.

Spud, if indeed it is the cunt, still says nothing. He could be deid, but probably no, because ah think his eyes are open. But that means fuck all.

Trainspotting, London: Minerva, 1994, p. 95