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André Gide's Translation of Hamlet.

Merun Thomas

JEAN-LOUIS Barrault's production of 'Hamlet,' as translated by André Gide, opened at the Marigny Theatre in Paris on October 17th, 1946.

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'Hamlet' was not Gide's first assault upon Shakespeare. In 1917 he translated 'Anthony and Cleopatra' in the course of seven months' spasmodic but almost effortless enthusiasm, and it was not until 1922 that he turned to 'Hamlet,' a much more difficult task. His 'Journal' provides us with much information about his attitude to the processes of translation. 'Je plonge dans la traduction d' *Antoine et Cléopâtre* avec ravissement' (Journal 21/4/1917) and 'J'épouse avec ravissement le texte de Shakespeare et suis extrêmement satisfait de certaines pages' (ibid 12/11/1917) are remarks that contrast vividly with such entries as '... Cette traduction de "Hamlet" qui m'obsède à présent, me maintient le nez contre les mots. Comment l'esprit prendrait-il du champ, sans cesse ramené et tiré en arrière?' (ibid 11/7/22). Three days later his mind was made up—'J'achève de traduire ce matin le premier acte de "Hamlet" et renonce à pousser plus avant. J'ai passé trois semaines sur ces quelques pages à raison de quatre à six jours par jour. Le résultat ne me satisfait pas. La difficulté n'est jamais tout à fait vaincue et pour écrire du bon français il faut quitter trop Shakespeare.'

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This fragment (Act I only) was published in 1929 with a few minor alterations, but not until 1942 was a continuance envisaged. In May of that year Gide met Jean-Louis Barrault on two occasions described in the 'Journal, 1939-1942' in the following terms: 'Une autre grande joie, à Marseille ce fut la rencontre de Jean-Louis Barrault. Admirable visage, respirant l'enthousiasme, la passion, le génie. Je ne sens chez lui aucun des insupportables défauts des acteurs. Barrault m'invite instamment à achever pour lui ma traduction de "Hamlet" et je lui ai fait si grande confiance que je voudrais aussitôt me mettre au travail.'

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But before considering the production, what is to be said of the hard-on text? Only some of the many problems can here be outlined. Prose is employed throughout (except for the play within the play)—a curious, muscular prose, remarkably twentieth-century in vocabulary, yet with inevitable conscious archaisms in sentence structure. Its result from the standpoint of comprehension is startling, for although the speech rhythms and the syntax impress upon the hearer the feeling of a style noble, at the same time he is never lulled into that state of intoxicated half-understanding that the unaccustomed language of the original so often produces in an English audience. On the contrary, he is brought violently into contact with the realities of the plot in such a way that a study of this translation yields as full a reward as much of the criticism written round the play.

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It should not be thought, however, that no meaning of Shakespeare. In his preface to the published edition Gide shows himself fully aware of the difficulty when he says, 'tant qu'il (le traducteur) n'a rendu que le *sens* du texte, il n'a rien fait; presque rien fait... Rien de plus facile que de quitter l'exacritude pour le lyrisme et de perdre pied. Mais il s'agit précisément de ne rien perdre, ni pied, ni aile, ni raison, ni rime (ou rythme), ni logique et ni poésie; or cela est une difficulté qui souvent paraît insurmontable.'

It is not therefore surprising to find that a translator who has devoted so much care to his work with at the same time so clear a conception of the result at which to aim should have largely succeeded in producing the required effect.

Often the lyricism of the original finds an echo in prose of great beauty, smooth flowing and haunting in its grave and placid rhythms—such as the Queen's lament over Ophelia (IV, 7):

'Vers les rameaux inclinés elle se haussait pour y suspendre ses couronnes: la branche où elle prenait appui s'est brisée lasse de ses trophées herbeux et la laissant choir elle-même parmi les larmes de la rivière. Les voiles d'abord s'étalèrent et la soutinrent quelques instants: ou aurait dit une sirène.'

Among the most successful scenes are those of Hamlet's antic disposition:

Le Roi: Et maintenant, Hamlet, où est Polonius?

Hamlet: A souper.

Le Roi: A souper! Où?

Hamlet: Non où l'on mange, mais où l'on est mangé. Certain congrès de vers politiques s'en prend à lui.

A big difficulty is the rendering of English monosyllables—realised moreover by Gide, as is seen from an entry in the 'Journal' in the early days (11/7/22): 'Un certain besoin de nombre, une complaisance à l'eurythmie courbe mon style. Je voudrais moins de polissure; plus de cassure et d'accent.'

Sometimes there is failure, as in such passages as Act III, Scene 2, where the force of the King's 'Give me some light away' is sadly lessened when it becomes,

'Qu'on apporte de la lumière! Partons!'

At other times, however, even this structural difference between the two languages seems overcome (e.g., Act V, Scene 1):

Hamlet: Sang du Christ! Montre un peu ce que tu peux faire! Pleurer? te battre? jouer/te déchirer toi-même? avaler un dragon? boire un fleuve?

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André Gille's translation—two

Many are the small felicities of phrase ('It is a nipping and an eager air' — 'Une bise aigre et qui souffle l'onglée') many the subtle variations of tone to accord with the changing moods of scenes and characters as in Polonius' advice to Laertes, in Ophelia's madness, in the gravedigger's scene. Perhaps it should be stated that one sad disappointment is in store for the reader in that Fortinbras' lines at the close of the play have suffered sadly in the transit. It is not therefore surprising that this last scene proved to be the least effective in Barrault's production, where it bordered dangerously upon the burlesque. It was no accident that all the actors had difficulty in retaining the interest of the audience during their soliloquies. At these points where narrative pauses for a while, Shakespeare has called a halt. But the change in pace is carefully concealed by poetry which so enchants the ear that we fail to notice that the race of narrative has stopped. Transfer these passages to prose, and we become acutely conscious of the slackened pace. Aware of this, the mind has time to wander and to brood upon the artificiality of the soliloquy.

Nothing demonstrates more clearly the advantages of blank verse as a dramatic medium. There is no equivalent in French, and to lurch suddenly, for example, into Alexandrines as an alternative to prose, would only be to accentuate the change of style more sharply. It is therefore foolish to expect the actors to render them in the accustomed English manner. How then is he to tackle them? This is a problem which not only Barrault failed to solve, but which must continue to present an obstacle to all producers. The urgency of its solution is demonstrated in its far-reaching effects: for the whole balance of the play becomes affected. Nowhere is this more apparent than in its effect upon the character of Horatio.

Horatio *does* very little. He is the yardstick by whose integrity we measure Hamlet's progress. We accept him, not by what he does but for what he says, and more particularly for the way he says it. Rob him of his poetical expression, and there is little left. Such a step is of the gravest consequence: for without a substantial and credible Horatio, Hamlet's stature at once diminishes.

The measure of Hamlet's credence in the ghost is gauged by the sceptical Horatio: Hamlet goes round to work every bit as much as does Polonius, and is himself responsible for as many 'bloody and unnatural acts' as any of the corrupted court that he sets out to purge. Horatio alone is irreproachable. His friendship with Hamlet is therefore of cardinal importance in establishing Hamlet's fundamental integrity. Yet if the relationship between them is important before Hamlet's departure for England, it is indispensable on his return: for it is in the scenes with Horatio that we are made aware of the new Hamlet, resolved in purpose, now stronger than the rock to which he used to cling, whose nobility is measured by the tribute to it *from* Horatio.

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Jean Desailly did his best with the material at his disposal, but with such lines as 'Bonne nuit gentil Prince. Que le chant de ~~de~~ cohortes d'anges te condui/ vers le repos' substituted for 'Good night sweet prince. And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest,' it was an unenviable task. In particular he was handicapped by cutting which in the last two acts reduced him to a cypher and the play to a series of incidents.

Barrault's whole production and his own performance would have benefited greatly from a closer scrutiny of the play's construction. The secret of unity lies in the line 'Treachery. Seek it out.' Hamlet explains clearly enough in his first soliloquy the enormity of the situation in which he finds himself, and from that time forward he and Horatio endeavour to resolve it. On this firm scaffolding almost any interpretation can be safely built. Barrault chose rather to erect an elaborate pastiche of distinguished character studies, spectacle, and lavish detail. There were moments of intense excitement—the first player spouting his lines as if they were Corneille, the appearance of the ghost, Polonius' death: others of extreme pathos—Jacqueline Bouvier's Ophelia. There were still other moments of riotous fun . . . Polonius and the gravediggers provoking peals of spontaneous laughter. Barrault himself pursued his revenge with vigour, but spiritual growth of character was scarcely perceptible. His movement is a constant source of delight, and what he lacks in range of voice he makes up for by the richness of his gesture. Yet we left the Marigny rather with a collection of exquisite vignettes than elated by high tragedy.

A note about the music. This could scarcely have been bettered. Honegger has produced a score at once unobtrusive yet exciting. Especially effective were the appearances of the ghost, heralded by a single high-pitched note on a violin above the even, muffled beating of a drum, rising inexorably in speed and volume as if attendant on the ghost's command.

This production was one of the most stimulating versions of 'Hamlet' for many years, and if these few remarks have seemed unduly critical it is because space forbids mention of all but the most interesting points of discussion, and because such high artistic effort demands and does not suffer from rigorous analysis. Similarly, all that has been said of the translation can but be put into truer perspective by the addition of Thierry Maulnier's comment in a review of the play.

'Que dire de la traduction d'André Gide sinon qu'elle mérite de devenir la seule.'

M.T.
G.W.