

This article was printed in Khairoullin, Vladimir (editor-in-chief). 2010. In: *Translation Studies and the Law: an international volume of scholarly papers*. Ufa, Russia: Bashir State University. 19-30.

A TRANSLATOR'S GLOSSES

Abstract

This article focuses on the glosses made by the Danish translator of four English adventure novels. The novels are allegedly recently discovered manuscripts and therefore demand some 'editing' by the English 'editor' (and author). To these editorial comments which add credence to the tall tales, the Danish translator has added glosses of his own.

At best a mere handful of these translator's glosses can be said to provide relevant information. In most cases, however, they are not concise, but add irrelevant information or make for confusion. The glosses show a disregard for the specific context in which the glossed terms occur as well as the non-realistic aspects of fiction. In addition, there are some highly personal comments in the glosses that reveal the translator's views, his background, and his preferences.

The lesson is that translators should be extremely cautious about adding glosses to works of fiction.

In this article, I shall take up the question of translators' comments by analysing the procedures used by a well-known Danish translator in his renditions of four English novels.

The translator

The translator in question is Mogens Boisen (1910-1987) who, in his day and age, was a highly respected translator in Denmark. In addition to being an officer in the Danish army, he was also a prolific translator of fiction as well as non-fiction books from Norwegian, Swedish, English, German, and French. All told he translated about 800 works, including books by Sigmund Freud, Vladimir Nabokov, André Malraux, and Günther Grass. He took a keen interest in the translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* of which he published no less than six gradually improved renditions over the years. He prided himself of his work as a translator and publicly admitted only to having made one error in all his translations.

The present article is not intended to open a debate about the quality of Mogens Boisen's translations. It will focus exclusively on the notes he has made in his renditions of four English novels. Mogens Boisen belonged to a generation of translators that was brought up to 'render the original precisely as it was written' because his training was based on in-school translations that would focus on the transfer of 'the full meaning'.

The novels

The four novels in question are written by George MacDonald Fraser and are the alleged 'Flashman Papers'. They are humorous, exaggerated and tongue-in-cheek descriptions of the career and adventures of a British officer in the reign of Queen Victoria.

The officer in question, Harry Flashman, never lived. He is a fictional character whose claim to literary fame was slender: he is a minor character in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857). *Tom Brown's Schooldays* used to be a classic. It enjoyed immense popularity and started the whole genre of British public-school novels that were written until the 1960s and '70s and still linger on in the setting of the school for wizards in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books. *Tom Brown's*

Schooldays is firmly set at the public school of Rugby when Dr. Arnold was the headmaster. Flashman is a sadistic bully who is eventually evicted from the school for being drunk.

Flashman occasionally refers to his stay at Rugby. But otherwise, the series of books are descriptions of his adventures, his loves, and his cowardly and disreputable behaviour which is consistently misinterpreted as heroism by most of his countrymen. The action takes place in far-flung locales such as the Crimea, Afghanistan, the US, and India.

The books thus pretend to picture life in the Victorian age, specifically 1839-1858.

The books are *Flashman* (1970) *Royal Flash* (1977) *Flash for Freedom* (1974), and *Flashman in the Great Game* (1980). The dates listed apply to the Danish translations.

The model for the analysis

Elsewhere, I have argued that there are six layers in texts, no matter whether they are originals or translations. These layers can be discussed cogently although there is some overlapping. (Dolle-
rup, 2004. 87-88)

- the structural (the textual order of elements, passages, and episodes),
- the linguistic (including words, word order, phrases, repetitions of words, sounds, assonance, euphony, and 'style'),
- the content ('facts', and points and elements in the structural and linguistic layers which can serve for interpretation), and
- the intentional layers.

The content layer, relating to points or segments in texts, generally allows for interpretation in the sense of a text-internal, consistent meta-understanding of specific texts; the intentional layer will usually allow for an external meta-understanding of the text as related to human experience (ranging from morals to universal transitions in life).

The paratextual layer consists of material which is text-external and 'added by circumstances', in this case the translator (and 'the editor')

There is also a chronological axis. This is noteworthy especially with works that continue to be read and to be popular after the epoch in which they were penned.

In the present analysis, we shall focus on the linguistic, the content, the paratextual, and the chronological layers.

Notes in literature

One rarely meets with notes in original works of fiction. This is not surprising, since they are written to be heard or read fluently by the authors who take it for granted that their audience has the prerequisite knowledge for understanding them. Thus there are no notes in Shakespeare's works, in Góngorra's poetry, in Dante's poetry, etc.

The problem arises within the source culture the moment works become dated and words and passages are incomprehensible to native audiences. This is where the chronological layer comes in. The notes on the Shakespearean plays in, say, the well-known British Arden edition, are evidence of the explanations scholars from later ages have come up with to clarify the Shakespearean texts to English readerships of new ages. The same goes for the comments on other classics in their respective cultures. There is nothing mysterious about this, for words fall out of use, allusions become ob-

scure, and things once understood by all need comments to better understood; we all know examples of comments on classics from our own nations.

In Translation Studies, translators' notes have called for few studies. It is fairly obvious that they are not only hard to classify but they are also difficult to identify unless one makes a painstaking collation of the original and the translation: it stands to reason that most translators will either avoid difficulties (especially so if they do not realise that the passage presents a 'problem') or elegantly integrate the explanation in the translation (which, I assume, is rarely the case).

One distinction can be made though, namely between footnotes and forewords and postscripts. As we shall see we can also make a distinction between footnotes and end-notes.

The notes in the English edition

The English original is a put-on in itself. The English author, George MacDonald Fraser, pretends that he is merely the editor of the 'Flashman Papers'. According to the narrative in the foreword, these papers were recorded 1900-1905 by Harry Flashman. Then they were found by accident in 1965 and, according to the 'editor', their authenticity was conclusively proved in an article in the *New York Times* in 1969(!). Preliminary comments of a quasi-editorial nature (e.g. reactions from readers, comments on textual points) are given at the beginning. In addition, the volumes have footnotes or endnotes.

All told, the English edition thus pretends that we have to do with a Victorian original which is dealt with reverently (and tongue-in-cheek) by the presumed 'editor' George MacDonald Fraser, the modern author. The notes touch on the historical background (the chronological layer) and specific features (the content layer). Physically they constitute a paratextual layer.

In the first volume, the 'editor' uses footnotes, but in later volumes he resorts to end-notes.

The translator's notes

Flash for Freedom

In the first volume under discussion, the notes by the modern English 'editor' are fairly few and they concern conditions for the slave trade.



On his own, the translator inserts a word which he knows from his own Danish public school for a tyrannical boy. In so doing, he adds something not in the English text, namely a specific **public-school** term. He also errs in assuming that a term limited to one school is applicable universally. He also makes a social error: Unlike in Great Britain, going to a public school is not prerequisite for social recognition and social advancement in Denmark. And he also disregards the fact that whereas it is c. 10% of the British population that is educated at a public school, the corresponding figure in Denmark is below 1%.

When a slave trader tells Flashman to take along his gun when they are to bring some beads to some African traders and says: “I fear the Greeks even when I bring them gifts,” the Danish translator comments: “curiously enough the editor has failed to gloss this strange statement. It is a version of a passage from Virgil”. In his eagerness to castigate the ‘editor’, the translator overlooks the fact that Virgil had it that “I fear the Greeks even when **they bring me** gifts’ and that the gift alluded to is the Trojan horse. In other words: the quotation is distorted in the original and people well versed in classical literature will know it.

Abraham Lincoln makes a short appearance at a time when he is largely unknown to the American public, and once again the translator intervenes with the information that the remark Lincoln drops to Flashman is also found in one of Lincoln’s public speeches.

Flashman is taken to court when his slave ship is stopped by an American brig, *The Cormorant* at 85⁰ western latitude and 23⁰ of northern longitude. Here the translator feels obliged to add that a cormorant is a gluttonous bird and that the geographical location must be wrong – thus adding extraneous information and insisting that a completely unrealistic adventure tale must be realistic.

Royal Flash

After the ‘editor’s introduction, the translator advises readers familiar with English-American history to disregard his own footnotes and concentrate on the editor’s end-notes.

On closer inspection it turns out that the translator has introduced his own ideas in the ‘English editor’s preface’ since this ‘translation from English’ refers to the Danish translation of the first volume as well as a note the translator himself has made.



The very first page has called for no less than three comments. One concerns the importance of the battle of Gettysburg which decided the outcome of the American civil war (1861-1865) and thus arguably adds information to the setting of the novel. The second factual gloss gives the time of the Afghan wars – which is not mentioned in the English original since it is immaterial in the context where Flashman only refers to them for braggadocio about his military career.

The third comment is inspired by Flashman’s observation that historical events are often determined by somebody’s stomach-ache, a sailor’s drunkenness or some woman wagging her hips. This – fairly trite – statement makes the translator reproach the editor (!) for not having mentioned Napoleon’s haemorrhoids at Waterloo and that the later French Marshal, Phillipe Pétain, was found at a cheap hotel in the company of a woman when he was given an important command during the First World War. The translator throws in extraneous and irrelevant information and also shows off his own knowledge gleaned from fairly arcane military history.

The next note refers to the fact that a police officer touches his hat to which the ‘Flashman’ has added “this was before they used bobby-helmets”. The translator tries to help the reader along by informing them that Robert Peel reorganised the London police, but leaves out the crucial infor-

mation that Bobby is the pet name for ‘Robert’ which would have made then connection between the founder and the hat more obvious. Leaving out this information, the note is confusing.

Flashman mentions one of his mistresses and likens her to Madame Dubarry and Nell Gwyn. The translator adds that they were mistresses of kings of France and England, respectively, and gratuitously stresses that the first one was hated by the public and executed during the French revolution.

At the mention of haggis, the translator explains that it is a hot Scottish dish consisting of sheep’s offal, adding “Bon appetite!”

In the translation of “a generation of vipers”, the translator inserts a personal advertisement for a book by Philip Wylie on American mothers he found “highly readable”, before telling that the term is biblical.

Two references (in two books) to queen Jezebel are glossed differently, one with only a reference to the place where she is mentioned in the Old Testament and the other with a reference to her support of idols and that she was killed by king Jehu.

In rendering a German place-name, the translator informs readers that he has corrected the misspelt German names since they would irritate Danish readers whereas English readers “are accustomed to wrong spellings of German names”. In the next footnote he comments on the narrator’s use of “Aladdin’s cave” for a wonderful palace and tries to explain it as a symbolic comment on the dangers the narrator will subsequently meet with, instead of disregarding the slip (the author probably thought of ‘Aladdin’s palace’ or ‘Ali Baba’s cave’)

At a stage when the plot unfolds in Schleswig Holstein, the sovereignty of which was a tricky question, the translator tells an anecdote about his own failure to understand the complex issue.

Later Flashman is to personify a German prince who likes the opera “*Fra Diavolo*” by a certain Auber”, which is glossed with a Danish translation and the information that it was performed in Copenhagen in 1831. Flashman’s recollection of the Snow Queen from Hans Christian Andersen’s eponymous fairytale from his childhood, prompts a stern footnote that Andersen did not write the *Snow Queen* until 1844, one or two years after the Flashman adventure is allegedly taking place, and that Flashman is therefore a liar. Curiously enough there is no similar rebuke when Alice in Wonderland (1865) is mentioned in 1858.

The endnotes also call for translator’s glosses. The editor mentions that Wagner met the female protagonist at a performance of the opera *Rienzi*, to which the translator adds that in his personal view, this opera is far too long. A comment on the lady calls for a gratuitous comment that she could be termed a “woman from the Devil’s arrow”. And an optical telegraph is glossed with the information that we know nothing about this invention.

Flashman in the Great Game

In the opening of this novel, Flashman briefly refers to previous exploits in sufficient detail. This has not kept the translator from giving the title of the book in which these deeds are described.

And a reference to officers that have had parts of garments named after them, the translator intervenes to add that Flashman ought also to have mentioned yet another officer, general Havelock, who had a (now obsolete) article named after him.

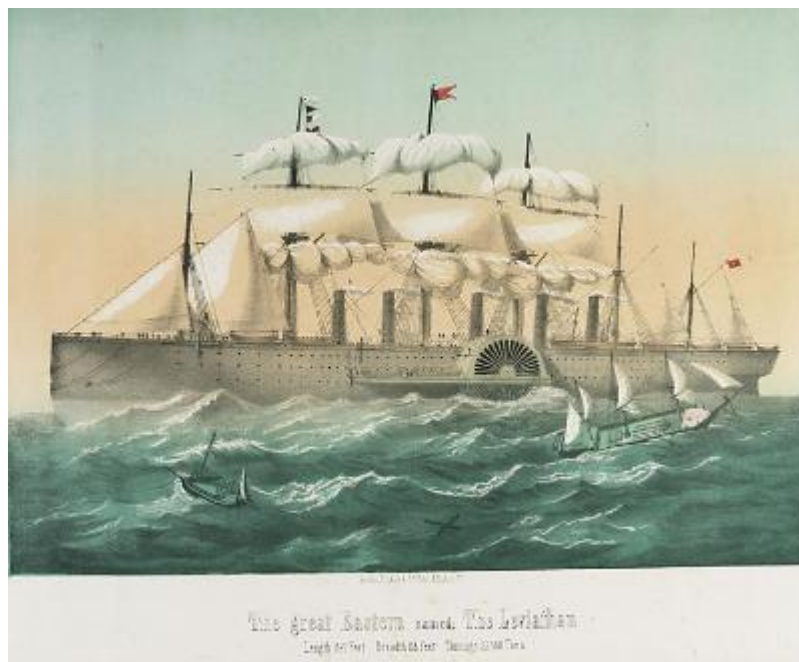
At one stage Flashman is greeted by his fellow officers who sing “Hurrah for Flash-Harry” and “Garryowen”. The last one is glossed as a Limerick suburb of ill repute, the name of which is used in a drinking song, and that a character in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* owns a dog by this name.

A ‘gunroom’ is – correctly – glossed as a room with guns on the walls, and Florence Nightingale’s life is summarised in three lines.

Later Flashman admits his own cowardice by stating that his liver is yellow like a cheese, which is duly explained by the translator in a footnote: yellow stands for cowardice and the liver is the seat of cowardice.

In one episode two commanding officers and their staffs appear. Here the translator specifies “officers on the staff” and goes on to comment on modern Danish usage of the term “stabsofficerer” which, in his view, has become imprecise. In another place we are informed that officers of the line sneeringly refer to officers on the staff as “snoren.sser” which word alludes to the ribbons on their sleeves.

Subsequently, a Shakespearean expression (a beast with two backs) is located, and a dying man’s reference to the headmaster of Rugby, Doctor Arnold, is explained. The description of an Irishman plunging into a river with a “splash like *The Great Eastern*”, calls for the comment that until 1907 this was the largest ship in the world but that Flashman makes an error in referring to it in 1857 since the ship was not launched until 1860.



The Leporello-list is correctly glossed as the names of women seduced by Don Juan in Mozart’s opera of the same name.

At the end, Flashman has received a copy of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and is aghast with the description he meets with of himself in his youth but concludes that nobody will associate him with it. The translator adds that the description of Flashman is not long in the book and that the Danish translation of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* is shoddy – a fact that did not keep him from quoting a pas-

sage verbatim from the translated book at the opening page of the first volume of the Flashman Papers.

Discussion

To get straight to the point: a couple of the translator's comments may be helpful to readers. But the vast majority are unnecessary, and quite a few incomplete, too long, or downright irrelevant. Let us approach them according to the model I outlined before, adding that by one token, they are all, just like the comments in English, paratextual.

The linguistic layer, individual words

A few of Mogens Boisen's comments concern individual words or terms at the linguistic layer. Two notes point to a certain unfamiliarity with modern Danish. The comment that 'glædespige' ("a woman of pleasure") is a 19th century term that is now obsolete is incorrect since the word is perfectly understandable to modern Danes; so is the translator's claim that 'møgunger', a derogatory term used about junior boys and girls, is confined to the public-school domain; it is a word in common use.

The translator introduces one word from his own public school without any authority from the original, "drøjesyg" (for 'tyrannical'), and, at another place, a word that has been obsolete for at least 300 years for a prodigal son ("den forlorne søn").

As a translator, Mogens Boisen wonders about how to render "promiscuity" and decides in favour of the modern Danish loan from English (and Latin) ('promiskuitet'), but cannot help citing a strange lexical equivalent that seems to an *ad hoc* creation ('flængparring'), in addition to his own suggestion which, in English, would be "the urge to frequently change lovers".

Although none of the translator's footnotes are indispensable, a few may actually be informative to readers. These would include the importance of the battle of Gettysburg, that haggis is a Scottish specialty, that a gunroom is decorated with weapons, and the information that the liver and yellow are associated with cowardice as well as the potential misunderstanding in the reference to the 'doctor'/headmaster.

Nevertheless an adept translator would have left out the added information or, if necessary, have included them in a fluent rendition giving a reasonable approximation of the sense in the English original, e.g. "the decisive battle of Gettysburg", "the Scottish haggis made of sheep's offal", "the room decorated with guns", "[the hero Flashman] is a coward in his heart of hearts", and "my old headmaster, the doctor of philosophy".

The translator has unearthed a couple of errors, namely the spelling of German place-names (which would never bother a British audience).

Content layer

Other comments are superfluous, at least in the context. We need no dates for the Afghan wars. In other cases, the glosses are problematic because they go beyond what is needed. It may be that Danes (who are very irreligious) need the information that Jezebel is mentioned in the Old Testament, but if so they need to know that she is wicked rather than the details of her death. We need only to know that Madame Dubarry and Nell Gwyn were royal mistresses in the context, whereas

giving details about one and not the other is lopsided. In the gloss on the Leporello-list the crucial word ‘list’ is not found in the gloss; similarly, we need a link between the helmets and the name of the founder of the police force in the reference to bobby-helmets; and in the comment on ‘Garryowen’ the only relevant piece of information is that it is a drinking song. The gloss on Florence Nightingale does not need to summarise her life but merely indicate why she is well-known, namely as the founder of the nursing profession.

Some glosses are misleading e.g. when translator obscures rather than clarifies the inverted reference to the Trojan horse. The curious expression “a beast with two backs” is not made clear by pointing out that it derives from Shakespeare.

Fact vs. fiction

The translator does not seem to be aware that fiction operates by its own laws, and that geographical places are not all that important as long as landlubbers are convinced that the action takes place on the high seas. He misses the point that it is perfectly legitimate to have a fictional optical telegraph in a fictional world. He is also prone to attach a deeper meaning to things which are, perhaps meant to be jokes, such as the name of the ship, *The Cormorant* and the Aladdin’s cave.

At least two instances calling for the translator’s castigation could be excused by the fact that Flashman recorded his adventures in 1900-1905, more than forty and fifty years after they took place. This goes fact that Flashman could not have remembered the *Snow Queen* from his childhood since it was not written at that stage. Similarly, Flashman does not state that the Irishman leapt into the river with a splash like *The Great Eastern* but could have recalled this when he wrote his life story 1900-1905.

Superfluous comments

The information that the opera ‘Fra Diavolo’ was performed in Copenhagen in 1831 is arcane and irrelevant. The comment that Wagner’s *Rienzi* is too long and the translator’s comments on the woman protagonist belong in this category as well.

Translator intrusions

In some cases, the translator has no scruples about venting his own views: the “Bon appetite!” of the haggis, the advertisement for Philip Wylie’s book *A Generation of Vipers*, and the superfluous glosses on officers whose names were used for pieces of garment, are all translator intrusions in the text. These go beyond what one usually meets with in a translation. And the translator’s account of his own attempt to understand the Schleswig-Holstein conflict is a major rupture in the narrative.

The translator’s background as an army officer tells when he introduces a Danish officers’ slang term “snoren.sser” (for ‘officers of the line’ and known to perhaps 300 officers) in the text – with a gloss – where the English text was straightforward, and notably in his aside in which he laments modern Danish laxness in the use of the term staff officers (“stabsofficerer”). This military background becomes quite ludicrous when he comments on Napoleon’s haemorrhoids at Waterloo and General Petain’s amorous entanglement during the First World War, since, in addition to being beside the point in the contexts, they must belong to arcane military lore. However relevant the first

may have been to the outcome of the famous battle, the second episode hardly matters in a military context.



The most interesting intrusion is found in the translator's gloss on "Garryowen" in which he refers to the dog of this name in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It illustrates that his lifelong obsession with coming up with the 'perfect translation' of Joyce's book would even find its way into a translation of fiction for entertainment.

Conclusion

At one level, the present discussion concerns the work of one Danish translator, Mogens Boisen, in four books.

At this level, it is necessary to keep in mind that, thanks to his own good contacts and self-advertisement, Mogens Boisen was a highly esteemed translator. His translations were made in an epoch in which extensive and profound foreign-language study was the preserve of a select few. I recall having come across terms such as "masterfully translated by Mogens Boisen", and it seems as if not only the publishers but also the reading public accepted a certain degree of personal intrusion from the translator Mogens Boisen. According to our personal views we may accept or reject them.

At another level, we are discussing consistency in translations. The two different and faulty glosses on Jezebel and the inserted cross-references to previous translations are minor blemishes. It is inconsistent to translate the title of Auber's opera in a footnote and not in the main text, since the footnote also provides the information that it was performed in Denmark. And the information given in the preface of *Royal Flash* that readers familiar with Anglo-American affairs should not heed his footnotes are thoroughly contradicted by the translator's emphatic insistence on the next page on showing his superior knowledge.

At this stage we should have a closer look at the translation ideologies of Mogens Boisen's time and epoch. Academic teachers of translation formerly had it that if the original referred to a book that had already been translated, one would consider this an authoritative part of the national culture and consequently quote it rather than do a translation of one's own. Mogens Boisen therefore used the "old" translation of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* at the beginning of the book he translated in 1970 only in 1980 to find that the translation was poor. Let us add that the academic teachers had no idea that there are no "authoritative" translations apart from those of religious texts and EU law.

Another tenet was that the translator should ‘render the original exactly as it was’. Indirectly, it will be appreciated that a precise translation was his goal in the rendition of *Ulysses* which was ‘improved’ over the years in six different editions. But it cannot be said to apply to translations under review for they are actually marred by most of the translator’s glosses.

At a third level we observe a process in which comment is heaped on comment; it makes it hard for readers to distinguish between the narrators involved (in the case of the ‘Flashman Papers’ they are ‘Flashman’, the editor (George MacDonald Fraser), and the translator (Mogens Boisen)). In other words, readers get them wrong. This is a process which is found in classical works in which comments have fused with the ‘original texts’ and are often indistinguishable from them. At this level, the present analysis is a warning about not glossing translations of fiction.

Fiction is fiction and meant to be read fluently. It should not be interrupted by glosses. It is telling that George MacDonald Fraser moved from providing footnotes to giving endnotes, in all likelihood because he found footnotes disruptive to the reading.

The case under discussion shows that even when the original has notes, the translator’s notes are rarely useful. Translators should not gloss translations of fiction if they want them to go down with the audience. The translator in doubt should consult a colleague, and if no colleague is to be had, use her imagination and solve the problems as well as possible. For adding a footnote is more likely to make for confusion than clarity.

Reference

Dollerup, Cay. 2004. Translating for reading aloud. *Meta: Translators’ Journal* 58. 2003. 81-103.

Caution

The above comments apply only to translations of fiction.