8 March 2013: On Translation III – Literary Translation and Versions of Ovid

*From April Pierce*

Today we discussed a major text and practiced some comparative criticism. First, we discussed the Introduction and Chapter One of Clive Scott’s *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (2012). Secondly, we addressed various English translations of Ovid’s “Pyramus and Thisbe” from the *Metamorphosis*, which we read in addition to the original. In preparation for this discussion group, we read Arthur Golding’s 1567 translation, William Shakespeare’s use of the story in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595), A.D. Melville’s 1986 translation, and Ted Hughes’s 1997 translation.

The first half of the discussion group focused on Scott’s theory of translation. We discussed Scott’s wide definition of translation, touching on his method and meta-translation of poetry (paying particular attention to the example of Rilke). The rigidity of translation processes generally, and the “strangeness” of Scott’s approach were assessed. Each of us had different reactions to his approach. We wondered about the difference between structuralist and phenomenological approaches to translation, as outlined in Scott’s piece. Several questions emerged: what are the stakes of inviting the pre-linguistic features into the text? Is the record or transcription of the process of translating within the text a “block” to the individual’s reading process, or does it encourage new readings? Is there a crucial difference between reading translation and “practicing” translation? Is the aesthetic aspect of the “final product” a significant feature in the selections made by a phenomenological translator?

During the second half of the discussion group, a variety of issues and interests emerged, in conjunction with a discussion of the various translations of Ovid. We started by questioning how semantic value is transported between different readers. It was agreed that translators interact with original texts or stories in different ways, and that relationships to a text change depending on historical and cultural contingencies. We wondered whether one can translate a poem “better” than the original (can one be a “better Virgil than Virgil”?) We noted that generic variation in Ovid is encouraged by the text, which accounts for the proliferation of stories. This turned into a discussion of issues like copyright and the status of the author-as-translator. We wondered how we could think about modes of translation in the new media context (and whether or not this could be “phenomenological”). We compared the various translations of Ovid with our understanding of what a translation “ought” to do, noting that each translator seemed to have their own notion of what was desirable in the final text. For instance, Hughes’ translation seemed to focus more on imagistic moments and structural interest, whereas other translations retained more musical elements. Finally, we returned to the Scott piece, asking whether the process of reading translations with various degrees of enjoyment had something to do with the notion of a phenomenological approach to translation.

We concluded the discussion with a look ahead to next term. Several ideas were tabled, including:

- a seminar on comparison
- a seminar on global English and standardization
- a seminar on the role of the translator as-author