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The Bottom of the Barrel: A Review of Jan Kott's *The Bottom Translation*

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In the preface to his fine collection of anthropological essays *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which he calls "a kind of retrospective exhibition," Clifford Geertz notes wryly that "all of us who write social science journal pieces have a nonbook in us, and more and more of us are publishing them" (vii). Jan Kott's *The Bottom Translation* is living proof that the humanities too manufacture "nonbooks." But Kott, alas, is no Geertz.

Old articles have here been shamelessly shelved between hard covers, with hardly a pretense of unity. Despite the subtitle, "Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition," only the first two essays, on *Dr. Faustus* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, say anything about carnival. The next two articles and an old performance review are about *The Tempest*: apparently Kott did not have enough old articles on *The Tempest* about him to assemble a book on that play alone. The "nonbook" is neatly rounded off with two pieces having no connection whatsoever with anything else in the collection, and unheralded by title or subtitle: a film review, of *Ran*, and a note on cruelty in Webster.

Geertz gave some thought to the rationale of collecting one's essays; Kott clearly did not. "Correcting one's misjudgments by writing changed views back into earlier works seems to me not wholly cricket," Geertz reflects, "and it obscures the development of ideas that one is supposedly trying to demonstrate in collecting the essays in the first place" (viii). Undisturbed by such philosophical niceties, Kott seizes the opportunity of a reprinting to make such corrections to his earlier works as these: *Dream's* exchanges of lovers, described in the title article's original version in *Assays* as "the brutal and violent change of desire (139)," becomes in the book "the change of partners" (56); of Fuseli's Titania we learn in *Assays* that "she is nude" (135), but in the book "she is almost nude" (50); in *Assays* the eyes of Fuseli's Titania "are half-closed as if in ecstasy" (135), while in the book they are just "half closed" (50); the article's theory that "desire ceases to use a paradigmatic language" (138) becomes in the book "desire ceases to hide under the symbolic cover" (55). "A very refined torture" in the original version of "The Tempest, or Repetition" (*Mosaic* 12) becomes "a very refined diet" in the book (72); the book's description of Puck as "a strange

combination of the classical satyr with Robin Goodfellow from English folklore" (112) has been altered from the original statement that Puck was "taken from English folklore" (*Arion* essay, 429).

Geertz had held to "a *stare decisis* view of published pieces, if only because if they need very much revision they probably ought not to be reprinted at all, but should be replaced with a wholly new article getting the damn thing right" (viii). One article in *The Bottom Translation*, however, "*The Tempest*, or Repetition," has been rewritten from the ground up, right down to changing "scamper" to "scurry" to render the motion of rabbits (original 9, book 69). Insofar as they reduce wordiness the revisions, which alter virtually every sentence, are improvements. Some reductions are pretty drastic, though: for example, "The myths of Greece and Rome were transmitted through the ages as emblems, icons, names and stories of gods, heroes and monsters, and carried with them the Mediterranean topography" becomes "Greek and Roman myths were Mediterranean" (original 10, book 70). Is all this, in Geertz's term, "cricket," especially seeing that all these essays have been translated from Polish, and in this case the same translator's name appears on both the original article and the book's drastically-altered version? Some essays have hardly been touched — only a few words of "*The Aeneid* and *The Tempest*" have been altered — while of others one can only say, "Bless thee! Thou art translated."

The ease with which Kott's words can be altered or moved is one sign of a lack of controlling logic in the way he put them together in the first place. The book lacks architecture. The disconnectedness of its general shape — little contact between one "chapter" (article) and the next — is repeated in microcosm in smaller units of style and argument. There is often little connection, or at best an associative connection, between one paragraph and the next, and no sense of where the argument is going: most readers, I suspect, would be hard put to paraphrase the main argument of any of these essays half an hour after reading it, often because there really is *not* a main argument. Not knowing where it is going, the argument drifts from paragraph to paragraph. Within paragraphs, too, the connection between sentences is weak, and in many cases no logic controls the progression: if this were an undergraduate essay, one would constantly be marking in its margins, "where is your topic sentence?" "how does this evidence support the point you are trying to make?" Here is a typical example:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods./ They kill us for their sport," says the blinded Gloucester at the beginning of his final wandering. "We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded/ Which way please them," says Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* when by mistake in the dark he kills the very man he wants to save. Webster has exchanged the gods, who kill us as flies, for the stars, which play tennis with us. Tennis was a favored entertainment at Renaissance courts, though it was played

according to different rules than those used currently. In *The White Devil*, the Duke of Brachiano, the lover of the treacherous Vittoria, changes his shirt in her room after returning from a round of tennis. The tragedy and comedy of manners, always bitter and venomous, are differently mixed in Webster than in Shakespeare.

Vittoria: Do you mean to die indeed?
Flamineo: With as much pleasure
As e'er my father gat me.

This is almost the last conversation between Vittoria and her brother, her murderer and her bawd. Webster was undoubtedly the most persistent successor to the dark Shakespeare. Yet often this is the Shakespeare of *Hamlet* and *Lear* mixed strangely with the Shakespeare of *Measure for Measure*, this mongrel of scoffing tragedy with a sarcastic comedy. "O me! this place is hell," shouts Vittoria, when she finds the poisoned and strangled body of her lover. "This place is hell," but in Webster hell is primarily on stage. The horror for Shakespeare is the essence of the real world. In Webster the aim of the horrifying scenes is, like Hitchcock's in our time, to terrify and to shock the viewers. (155-56)

Just try to analyze *that* paragraph with Francis Christensen's generative rhetoric! (What ever happened to the tennis balls, anyway?)

The formlessness of Kott's paragraphs is evident in the sea changes they undergo between article and book. In many cases two original paragraphs are combined (see 39, 41, 45-6, 56, 69, or 112) and in some cases one paragraph is split (55, 57). Sometimes the order of sentences in a paragraph has simply been changed around (see 70 or 123). Sometimes the opening sentence of a paragraph in the original article, an obvious spot for a topic sentence, is simply omitted in the book (see 31, 39, 41, 69); in one case the book creates a new opening sentence for a paragraph by taking one from near the end of another paragraph (see 51). That none of these changes appreciably affects the meaning is an index of the arbitrary order in which Kott puts ideas into paragraphs and sentences. Where an argument has no logical progression, cutting it up and putting it in some other order does not make much difference.

Ironically, this writer whose sense of logical connectives is so conspicuously weak is drawn (like butterfly to flame) to source study. The student of Comparative Literature will find little joy here. The connections Kott finds between Bottom and St. Paul, between *The Aeneid* and *The Tempest*, are as riveting as the connections between sentences in his own paragraphs. All the *persuasive* links were spotted years ago, by Kermode, Nosworthy, and others. Kott's contributions are more along these lines: "The imaginary scenery of Prospero's island seems astonishingly similar to the tiny islet on the Carthaginian coast in the *Aeneid* to which the refugees from Troy swam after the shipwreck".

The great cliffs come down

Steep to deep water, and the background shimmers,

Darkens and shines, the tremulous aspen moving

And the dark fir pointing still. And there is a cave

With water running fresh, a home of the Nymphs. (71)

Now, *The Tempest* mentions no cliffs, no shimmering/darkening/shining background, no aspen, no fir, and, except as referred to in the masque, no nymphs. It does mention a cave; no doubt it was the two caves that struck Kott as "astonishingly similar."

The same fatal force that drew a disconnected writer to focus on connections between literary works seems to have drawn a writer with practically no sense of humour to fix upon comedies. We have here a dark lascivious *Midsummer Night's Dream* and a despairing *Tempest* which has "always seemed to me the saddest of Shakespeare's plays," a feeling preserved through a reading so humourless as to see in the action only "purgatory" (84, 92). Here is a reader with a tin ear.

Throughout *The Bottom Translation*, the quality of the evidence is rock bottom. The book abounds in haymaking generalizations for which no evidence is offered because none exists. Consider these: 1. "Mephistophiles must execute Faustus's commands without objection" (7): untrue — Faustus's very first command, that he be brought a wife, is denied. 2. "In Shakespeare, translation is the sudden discovery of desire" (30): a check of the concordance reveals no uses of "translate" or its derivatives in this sense. 3. "There is in [*The Tempest*], even more than in *Doctor Faustus*, the bitter taste of lost hope" (84): what was the nature of Prospero's "hope"? He did not purposely go to the New World, hoping to found a utopia; Gonzalo's Golden Age dream was never Prospero's. If one of Prospero's "projects" fails (civilizing Caliban), others succeed (regaining his dukedom, seeing Miranda married, pleasing the audience). Whose lost hope is it that leaves that "bitter taste"? Kott takes Prospero's "all lost, quite lost" as a sweeping statement of existential despair (122), when in fact it refers only to Prospero's failure to civilize Caliban. 4. "In Shakespeare's tragedies, the essence of history is regicide and an endless parade of rightful rulers and usurpers" (87): this is untrue of six of Shakespeare's ten tragedies. No regicide occurs in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Timon of Athens*; and of the remaining four, regicide does occur in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* but occurs in *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar* only if we stretch the meaning of "regicide" to include the death of Roman emperors and near-emperors. 5. "Prospero's hermetic knowledge does not help him in the art of ruling. The library brings about his downfall" (92): what evidence is there that Prospero was gaining "hermetic knowledge" before he came to the island? He says simply that he was devoting himself to "the bettering of my

mind," and "the liberal arts" (1 ii 90, 73). 6. The stakes of Miranda's and Ferdinand's chess game "are the kingdom" (94): how so? Even if they do not marry, he is still heir to a kingdom, she to a dukedom. 7. There is an "insistent, almost mechanical symmetry in the stories of Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban, and ... unexpected equations of Caliban and Ferdinand, of Caliban and Miranda ..., an elemental transition and exchange between the one who imprisons and the one who is imprisoned" (98): come again? Do Ferdinand and Miranda "imprison"? What *can* all this mean? 8. What is the evidence for Kott's suggestion (122) that Prospero is being sent to Naples against his will? 9. Of Webster's "fortune's a right whore" (*White Devil* 1612), Kott avers, "seldom before had such a brutal and violent condemnation of Fortune rung from the English stage" (153): what about "fortune, that arrant whore, / Ne'er opens her gates to the poor" (*King Lear* 1607, II iv 52)? 10. "If *Titus Andronicus* had a sixth act, the first two rows of spectators would be next to be slaughtered because none of the principal dramatis personae remains alive at the end of the fifth" (155): cute, but untrue. Titus is almost unique among tragic heroes in leaving heirs behind to carry on his family: though Coriolanus, Antony, and Cleopatra leave heirs, all other tragic heroes die childless, lending an air of sterility to tragedy; but Titus leaves both son and grandson (and a brother), and his son becomes emperor. 11. "Faustus' lines have a personal tone not found in any of [Marlowe's] other plays, nor even in any of Shakespeare's dramas, except *The Tempest*": what is the evidence for this quaint, Dowdnesque assertion?

One could cite other irritations of the volume — the index is a mess, and there is no bibliography. But the main question is why the publisher bothered with it. Why assemble these unrelated and not very good essays? Kott gained fame a generation ago with a provocative book. Does that justify this one?

The stuff is old. Kott tells us that he began some of the essays "in 1972-73," and some hark back to a world older than that: until reading "The Two Hells of *Doctor Faustus*" I had not heard the old Faustus-as-heroic-and-doomed-transgressor-against-an-unloving-god reading of *Dr. Faustus* since the days of Una Ellis-Fermor. (I had not missed it, either.) Kott has made no attempt to engage current debate or theory about these plays: an analysis of footnotes to the first three essays shows that 28% are to works published before 1960, 39% to works published in the 1960s, 28% to works published in the 1970s (mostly before 1975), and only 5% to works published during the 1980s. Even when he has added sections to the original essays, he has not taken the opportunity to update the scholarship: a new section on page 44, for example, incorporates findings of scholars in 1960 and 1954; a new section on page 50 draws on works published in 1972, 1947, and 1975; a new section on page 72, works published in 1955 and 1969. Occasionally Kott

tries to spruce up his image a bit by replacing an antiquated pronouncement with something trendy: one of those "topic sentences" that began a paragraph in the original version of "The Bottom Translation" and was later completely excised was the nineteenth-century sounding "The final aim of philological criticism is to establish the relations between texts and their principal sources" (original article 119); this has been replaced, later in the paragraph, with a modish reference to the writerly text (32). But such cosmetic sprucings are not enough. A good deal of interesting work has been done, in the last fifteen years, on the plays Kott addresses, and nearly all of it has escaped his notice. Jan Kott is not our contemporary.

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Digestion > Deformation = Translation: Kott on Literary History

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When the world is upside down we are right side up, but when the world is right side up we are upside down. (Carlos Castaneda)

At the close of Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, a young man, his hair still falling over his blinded eyes, stands on the edge of a ruined battlement, a picture of the Buddha has fallen from his hands and drifts, fluttering, into the open space below. No one else is near. His protective sister, Lady Sué, has been decapitated. Hirodota, the old samurai warlord, has died and his three sons have been killed. The fool has disappeared. No one plays the roles of Albany, Kent and Edgar. The audience is compelled to believe that he will fall. What else could he do? The final scene is bleakly hopeless. If we think of *Ran* as a version of *King Lear*, as we are constantly reminded to do, the ending is puzzling. How does it correspond to *Lear*? Who (or what) is the young man? Earlier in the film, he has been Edgar, inhabitant of a desolate hut that Hirodota and his fool enter, an outcast living in misery. Now, since he is blind (his eyes gouged out, long before, by Hidetora) and soon to fall, he is also Gloucester. No clearest gods will preserve him, though. The Buddha has drifted away.

Yet now he is Cordelia as well. Even in the remotest adaptation of *King Lear*, Jan Kott insists, "Cordelia's place could not remain completely vacant" (150). The young man represents innocence. His death will be gratuitous and bleak. Something of the tragic effect that Shakespeare creates overwhelmingly in the final scene of *King Lear* emerges in the image of the young man blindly edging towards death, his flute, his sister and now the Buddha all lost. However, just as the blind man is both Gloucester and Edgar, condensing into a single character Shakespeare's diversity, so he is not the only image of Cordelia. Shakespeare is diffused, every aspect of his tragedy displaced, in Kurosawa's film. Saburo, Hidetora's third and youngest son, must also fill Cordelia's "place" and even Lady Sué, the devout, caring wife of the second son, her head cut off and wrapped, Kabuki-fashion in white scarves, to be delivered to her enemies, fills that elusive emptiness. All three displacements are victims of treachery; all three, undeserving their