

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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Works Cited

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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

fates. Amazingly, the audience, if it has read Shakespeare or knows the Lear story, can recognize these displaced images and mentally knot them together. Something of Cordelia, though no character represents her fully, remains in *Ran*. And Shakespeare, translated into alien forms (Japanese history and Kabuki conventions), diffused but not dissipated, everywhere beckons.

Kott's analysis of *Ran* comes towards the end of *The Bottom Translation* in an appendix of three occasional pieces.¹ The apparent obscurity of the location, however, does not indicate the importance of the analysis to Kott's main line of argument. *Ran* provides a complex instance of his general thesis that all literature translates into other literature, becoming different but remaining recognizably the same. Individual motifs as well as entire narratives are translated into very different sets of conventions, acquire new functions and undergo (often radical) modifications in significance. Yet through all the transformations the original can be perceived and grasped. It survives as a structure, a disposition at the heart of discourse, that limits but does not fully determine translated versions. Kott's chief example is the *Aeneid*. Studied, memorized, endlessly discussed, it gave Renaissance writers an important structural code (along with the *Metamorphoses* and the Bible) in terms of which new literature could be written. *The Tempest* exemplifies the process of absorption and transformation that Kott calls translation. "The *Aeneid* in *The Tempest*," Kott writes, "is both a paradigm and a spectacle" (126). The "Virgilian code" also underforms the play-within-the-play aspects of *The Tempest*, the highly self-conscious theater "of Prospero's art" such as the betrothal masque in the fourth act (122). Building upon previous scholarship, which he acknowledges, Kott discovers traces of the *Aeneid* throughout Shakespeare's play. They are there in the geography (at least one possible map places the action on an island between Tunis and Naples, roughly in the path of Aeneas' voyage from Carthage to Cumae), in corresponding characters and situations, such as the harpy that Ariel plays when he disrupts the illusory banquet (3.3), and in direct allusion. The presence of the *Aeneid* begins to appear as early as the first scene with the artificial storm that Prospero creates (corresponding to the tempest Juno raises in her anger as the Trojans sail from Sicily) and ends, according to Kott, with the masque. It is also present, though Kott does not comment upon it, in the final scene as the play translates Roman *pietas* into (something like) Christian piety: on the one hand, the duty that requires Aeneas to leave Carthage; on the other, the devotion that leads Prospero to return to Milan, leaving his magic behind, to resume both his civic and spiritual duties. Like *Ran*, Shakespeare's play translates a prior text into its

own terms, allowing the pre-text to survive, encysted but still efficacious, in its textual descendent.

Translation is Kott's key concept. One language can be rendered in another. Works of literature cross linguistic boundaries, often with ease and felicity. Types of writing, such as the picaresque novel, make the same journey without difficulty as do individual conventions and all manner of motifs. Kott has a less straightforward process in mind. For Kott, *translation* is the reworking of discourse in which structure remains constant, but the imagery, symbolic or iconic, undergoes modification; *transcriptio*, on the other hand, names the act of giving new meanings to old images without changing them (111-12). The distinction is central. Kott finds only the first term interesting. It indicates to him the recurring, always-present processes of literature. These come in two (very broadly designated) modes. First, images are translated up and down a scale of seriousness. In the tradition of carnivalesque literature, or in *serio ludere* generally, the images of the "top," the level of reason and society's official voices, are translated into images of the "bottom," the level of popular comedy, travesty and carnival mockery. "In *serio ludere*," Kott writes, "the top is only *mythos*; the bottom is the human condition" (38). The lower level, the particular and microcosmic, repeats, while deforming semiotic features, the universal and mythic, the macrocosm. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an example that Kott treats extensively, Bottom is seen to translate the regal imagery of the Athenian and fairy courts. Thus

In Bottom's metamorphosis and in his encounters with Titania, not only do high and low, metaphysics and physics, pathos and burlesque, meet, but so do two theatrical traditions: the masque and the court entertainment meet the carnival world turned upside-down. (52)

The idea of two theatrical traditions meeting in a single text, the one translating the imagery of the other, occurs elsewhere in Kott's discussion. Both *Doctor Faustus* and *The Tempest* display this "polytheatricality" (21). Second, parts of literary texts are translated into other texts. This, according to Kott, is what happens in both *Ran* and *The Tempest*. It is also what will happen when two theaters meet, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, since each will entail its own tradition, conventions and (perhaps) classic texts. This process of translation between texts is clearly what concerns him most, though he is never explicit as to who, or what, does the translating. Occasionally, in *The Bottom Translation* there are glimpses of a feral post-structuralist model of textual continuity: a vision of texts split apart, images sized and transformed, patches of still-bleeding tissue unmistakable within their new contexts. Texts yearn futurewards, towards their own deformations, when they will, like the young lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

1 Jan Kott, *The Bottom Translation: Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition*. Daniela Miedzyrzeczka and Lillian Vallee, trans. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1987.

suddenly discover their own desires (30). In the synchronic view of process, translation implies abrupt confrontation.

How does fiction survive its translations? What allows literature to undergo radical deformation and yet remain recognizable? After all, taken as a simple exercise in observation, it seems strange that works as intricate as the *Aeneid* or *King Lear* can be perceived, lending structure and significance, in other texts as manifestly different as *The Tempest* and *Ran*. The act of reading seems capable of recuperating even the most extreme displacements. "Symbolic paradigms allow themselves to be exchanged" (92), Kott writes, but the true mystery lies in their continuing familiarity, persisting through even drastic transformations. The problem has concerned narratologists, at least in passing, and their solution, elaborating the basic *sjuzet/fabula* distinction in Šklovskij, possesses an admirable clarity: think of stories as the "what" of narrative, the essential narremes in chronological order; think of the discourse as the "how," all that the author does to transform the mere whatness of the story into literature. Or, edging the narratological solution towards heresy, think of the story as a number of colligatory motifs, culturally embedded but endlessly permutable, that can fit together into a discourse. In both cases, the story's whatness can be recognized because an audience will be familiar with either the essential narremes or the motifs (some of which will be narremes), both of which, constituting the coherence of a genuine *what*, will be historically embedded in the audience's culture. Kott's solution is very different. It nearly makes the posing of the question unnecessary. (Kott does not explicitly raise the problem of story-recognition in translation, but it is aggressively implicit in his argument.) Kott thinks of literature as, in a phrase that he uses to describe the recurring cycles of politics, a "Great Mechanism" (154).

Literary texts persist through time, not so much as themselves but rather, as what subsequent literature makes of them. They become allusions, motifs and structural paradigms ("codes"). In the strong form of this argument, which one typically finds in deconstructive writings, literature is an implacable system, like language itself, in which texts unconsciously echo and recapitulate previous discourse. In this perspective, literature appears to be an in(de)finite intertextual field in which both continuity and repetition take place independently of conscious authorial desire. Thus Kott, the unmistakable resonance of Barthes' voice in his own, writes: "The literary tradition, 'the writerly text,' works forward and backward, constructing and destroying the classical texts, illuminating or disintegrating them, consecrating or desecrating, or both. The literary history is, in a very literal sense, the eating and digesting of the classical texts" (32). And so *The Tempest* may be said to have eaten and digested the *Aeneid*. It is not surprising that a classical text read so often in the sixteenth-century and an

"obligatory exercise for translation" in the schools (107), not forgetting the several public translations, should reappear in the literature of the time. Few readers of Shakespeare will fail to observe, though they may underread, its luminous presence in *Hamlet* (2.2). The *Aeneid* can be found, along with the *Metamorphoses*, in many Renaissance texts providing (or "doing") more or less what Kott claims that translated texts do within their intertextual destinations. Presumably, if Kott accepts the strong version of his own argument, it will also continue to reappear in even later texts, such as Conrad's *Victory* or Fowles' *The Magus*, that take *The Tempest*, eating and digesting it, as a textual code. However, it is not evident that Kott wholly accepts, though he makes use of, the strong form.

The strong and weak forms of the argument are both present in *The Bottom Translation*. The weak version holds that authors consciously appropriate prior literary texts: stealing parts that seem useful, elaborating or parodying them, embedding deliberate allusions. The strong version proposes the unconscious, even automatic, function of an intertextual apparatus, a mechanism of assimilation and reassimilation; the weak, a volitional intervention in which authors choose, knowing what they are up to and fully aware of textual agency, to allude to previous texts. In Kott's discussion the two versions of the argument are associated with, respectively, post-structuralism (as in the Barthesian passage cited above) and Baxtin. Kott's appeal to Baxtin accounts for the term "carnival" in the book's subtitle, even though Baxtin's ideas of social and textual cross-dynamics find a place in only the first two chapters. (There is no obvious explanation why Kott abandons Baxtin after the long second chapter on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, particularly since his analysis of the "Virgilian code" in *The Tempest* might easily have employed rather similar extrapolations.) Baxtin certainly does provide a model for linguistic exchange, although it is primarily a model to account for exchanges between two voices, in conscious opposition, either individual or collective. Kott, like many other critics, neglects Baxtin's fundamental emphasis upon language's social context. Carnival, after all, is an historical phenomenon, possessing a development and a gradual extinction within European culture from the middle ages to the early modern period. "Carnivalization," to the contrary, is the textual phenomenon that occurs when an author deliberately uses popular comedy within the creation of "high" literature. Shakespeare, like Rabelais, Grimmelshausen and Cervantes, is a master of carnivalization, though not (so far as we know) a carnivalian himself. Kott, again like other critics, fails to acknowledge that Baxtin writes a history of the novel that contains both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. Kott cites Baxtin in support of his position that mere linguistic diversity constitutes textual polyphony. However, not every instance of linguistic plurality is, for Baxtin, polyphonic. Polyphony

develops late in the history of the novel and is an extreme, sophisticated form of linguistic duality in which character-worlds, comprising both values and ideological assumptions, as well as words are orchestrated into an harmonious narrative structure.

Kott clearly likes the notion of textual "polyphony" and draws the concept from Baxtin into a much wider application. Polyphony, which Kott defines as "the meeting of various experiences, of various 'ways of speaking,'" is said to obtain in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, not as a function of dialogue between characters but rather, in "the 'dialogue' of various 'theaters,' of various theatrical forms in one play" (21). It serves Kott's critical purposes, one must suppose, to fashion this more widely-meshed net. Where Baxtin finds polyphony only in the late history of the novel, and then only fully in Dostoevskij, Kott, claiming Baxtin as his guide, finds it many places (in historical periods and genres for which Baxtin explicitly denies its possibility) and on textual levels as abstract as a dialogue between theaters. The very unBaxtinian notion of "polytheatricality" fits placidly into Kott's understanding of literature as a great, on-flowing, always-interacting digestive mechanism. In cases such as this, Kott's post-structuralist bias seems to rub hard against, ultimately warping and undermining, the Baxtinian insistence upon the author's volition. The larger point is plain: the extrapolation of critical analyses from theory, and in particular from an eclectic, multi-formed theory, inevitably entails a certain amount of internal conflict.

What should one make of critical uses of theory (such as, but not only, Kott's) that, in translating downwards, get it wrong, admit confusion and conflict? Kott's discussion is theoretically informed, but not steadily theorized. It manifests an unmistakable advance from his 1964 book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, in which the account given of Shakespeare's plays appealed to all the grim uncertainties and cheerless wastelands of postwar Europe, drawing for conceptual focus upon the drama, especially Beckett's, that had emerged from the ashes. Even in these later essays, Kott holds to many of the principles of *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. For example, an insistence upon the importance of a tradition of dramatic interpretation ("a 'text' does not exist independently of its readings" [31]) adds ponderous complexities to the model of literature as a systematic (assimilative) mechanism: subsequent readings, like new texts, translate, cannibalizing and digesting, classic texts. Literature is a whole, a tradition that bows to its own future, and is yet always already fragmented, split into countless separate, though reflecting, images of itself. Post-structuralist theory, far more than Baxtin, has helped to shape Kott's thinking. Yet he does not use theory clearly and the internal conflicts that he allows further obscure the argument. Theory should not be that way: its abstractness and inescapable remoteness from all practical applications should promote, if

nothing else, lucidity. On a bright day, straining one's eyes only a bit, it is possible to see theory's edifice under its continuous construction. It is a glorious structure, fragile as gossamer, labyrinthine as a star-system, but it is nearly beyond sight. Perhaps it is beyond even the up-grasping tendrils of literary texts. (Like the world itself, these patiently wait the theory that they will exemplify.) But, in the way of certain flying islands, theory covers everything with its shadow. Looking up, one can discern its builders working steadily, shifting propositions about, buttressing repetitions and paradoxes, inscribing indefinite polygons, polishing aporetic surfaces. Their sky-cranes and fulcrumless levers ceaselessly fulfil their tasks. It seems a shame, and perverse and wrongheaded, to draw threads down from that luminous building merely to make interpretations. The threads that Kott draws down are often weak, frequently entangled.

From the perspective of literary theory, *The Bottom Translation* is a mildly provocative book. It argues for a view of literature (a Rubik's Cube of synchronically related digestive tracts), largely post-structuralist in orientation, that some readers will find interesting, perhaps useful. It is a discontinuous discussion in which the chapters, all published separately as essays or reviews, do not lead into one another. However, there is a single argument: the analysis of Kurosawa's *Ran*, coming late in the discussion, reflects the same theoretical model of intertextuality as does the chapter on *The Tempest* and the *Aeneid*; the distinction between transcription and translation, upon which so much depends, indicates a small-scale mode of the same process. A book with many conceptual weaknesses, *The Bottom Translation* is worth reading on several counts. It does comment interestingly, usually summarizing previous scholarship, on a few Renaissance texts. It suggests a rather wild version of the familiar post-structuralist model of intertextuality. It should provoke reflection, at least among thoughtful readers, concerning the pitfalls/pratfalls of extrapolating from theory for the sake of interpretive comment. Above all, it demonstrates Kott's intellectual development since the 1960s. It should strike most readers as fascinating to observe, both in new ideas and in the revision of old, a scholar's, a thinker's even, intellectual presence within his world's ongoingness.

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