

« TRANSLATING DEFOE'S VERSE: REFLECTIONS ON THE TRANSLATION OF
CALEDONIA »

Emmanuelle PERALDO, Université Jean Moulin, Lyon III

“Why Defoe when we have Pope?” This question was provocatively asked by an eighteenth-century scholar to Andreas Mueller, one of the rare Defoe specialists who wrote a monograph on Defoe's verse, *A Critical Study of Daniel Defoe's Verse. Recovering the Neglected Corpus of his Poetic Work* (2010). And I thought it was a very stimulating and challenging question for anyone interested in Defoe and in poetry in the eighteenth century. When I read Mueller's book three years ago, I was interested in Defoe, having just published my thesis on *Daniel Defoe and the Writing of History* (2010). But I was really more interested in his prose narratives, in his long Histories (*Memoirs of the Church of Scotland*, 1717 or *The History of the Union of Great Britain*, 1709), or in his so-called novels (*Moll Flanders*, 1722, *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719, *Roxana*, 1724 etc). I had just come across a few of his poems when I considered his writing of history, as for example the huge political poem in twelve books *Jure Divino* (1706), or his famous *True-Born Englishman* (1701), or finally his poems on Scotland, *The Vision* and *Caledonia* (1706). So I did not really see the poet in Defoe, and if I had been asked, back then, to give the names of the most well-known poets of the time, I would certainly not have mentioned him. The first names that would have come to my mind would have been Pope, Dryden, Goldsmith, Gay, Thomson and Rochester. If I had tried to find other, less obvious, names, I might have said Elizabeth Singer Rowe, Anne Finch, Richard Blackmore, John Dennis or Matthew Prior, but still not Defoe. And this is probably due to the fame Defoe got thanks to his narrative fictions in prose; he was even called by some the “father of the novel”. That label sort of disqualified him as anything else than the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*. Indeed, Defoe is nearly always excluded from anthologies of poetry, whether it be Lonsdale's or Fairer and Gerrard's.

And yet, before he wrote his very-well known novels, Defoe had written about twenty long poems, about 20000 lines (Hunter, 2008, 216), including his verse satire *The True-Born Englishman* (1700), which was the best-selling poem of the opening decade of the eighteenth century and which remained remarkably popular throughout the rest of the century (the poem reached its twenty-fifth edition in 1777). Andreas Mueller opens the preface that he kindly wrote for my bilingual edition of *Caledonia* with this sentence: “Of all of the canonical English eighteenth-century authors, Daniel Defoe is perhaps the clearest example of the distortions that occur in grand narratives of English literary achievement.” In his *Critical Study of Daniel Defoe's Verse* (2010), he said that “to ignore Defoe is to ignore the dominant poetic modes that appealed to eighteenth-century consumers

of verse and, consequently, to impose on the period a skewed and elitist twentieth-century vision of Augustan verse, and ‘worthy’ or ‘true’ poetry more generally” (6). This is where my wish to translate Defoe’s verse originated: After having found for my dissertation a number of texts of interest by Defoe that were not known but that were very enlightening to understand his way of writing history (I am thinking for instance of *Due Preparations for the Plague* that was far less known than *A Journal of the Plague Year*, yet extremely interesting to understand Defoe’s writing of the plague), I wanted to work on minor texts from the author of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, and I chose *Caledonia* because, contrary to *The True-born Englishman*, it has not been much commented upon and it is not well-known. I had written a few pages on that poem in my thesis, as it was clearly part of Defoe’s writings on the Union between England and Scotland, but I wanted to explore it a bit more, and why not, to give it an editorial visibility that I think it deserves, through an annotated bilingual edition of *Caledonia*.

What I want to talk to you about today is the process of translating *Caledonia*, the choices I had to make, the difficulties I faced while translating Defoe’s verse, and the different stages of that process, and I will inscribe those practical reflections within a more theoretical discussion on poetry and verse in the eighteenth century and on how Defoe used verse as a “weapon”. I am going to get into details, but I shall just give you the main stages of that work-in-progress: I started working on that translation a year and a half ago. I translated about two stanzas every week working on explanatory notes in the meantime, and I kept the preface and address to the Parliament, as well as the author’s footnotes for the end. I finished the translation last May. I then wrote the critical introduction last summer. Then I had it prefaced by Andreas Mueller in September, and I started submitting it to potential editors in October. I will come back to that later, but I would like to start by talking a bit more about Defoe and the writing of poetry.

Defoe and the writing of poetry: poetry or verse?

Far from being marginalized as it may be today, poetry in the eighteenth century was not only very common, but it was also considered as a noble genre, as opposed to fictional writings, especially the couplet, as Hunter says: “the couplet was generally regarded as the most dignified and serious of poetic forms” (Hunter, in Richetti ed, 223) ; “the couplet signaled ambition and seriousness, indicated the express intention of engaging in extended argumentative discourse”, (Hunter, in Sitter ed, 20). Paul Goring underlines the cultural importance of poetry in the eighteenth century, which was “a time when poetry really *mattered*” (Goring, 2008, 63), and when it was “a far more normal aspect of daily life than it is today. (...) [It] was treated as a more public form of expression appropriate to all manner of

everyday topics such as politics, money, gardening, manners, cookery, married life, theology, the weather, fishing (...)” (Goring, 63-4). It is thus not surprising that Defoe, who was notoriously pragmatic and factual in his writings, highly interested in everyday life in its economic and political aspects, turned to that form of writing. According to Hunter, “if you want to fathom the politics, social issues, and attitudinal formations of the turn of the eighteenth century – from Williamite to Stuart Anne’s England and then to the ‘forging’ of England into Britain, the movement from *The True-Born Englishman* to *Caledonia* – you have to read, with real attention and care, Defoe’s poetry, all of it” (Hunter, in Richetti ed., 235). Defoe’s poetry is part of his writing of History (Peraldo, 2010), and the poet pretends he is an historian when he presents himself as a metonymic “impartial pen” in Stanza 11, reminding us of the impartiality of the historian: “Suffer th’impartial Pen to range thy Shore, / And do thee Justice”.

Defoe’s poems, whose output was very important between 1701 and 1706, were widely read in his time and they are representative of his era and of what poetry in the eighteenth century was, even if we are far from the romantic flights of poetry of Wordsworth or Coleridge, even if it is more appropriate to talk about Defoe’s “verse” than about Defoe’s “poetry”. Indeed, poetry has been mystified by the romantics, but before that, in the eighteenth century, the verse as form was used by many people from very different backgrounds: sailors would write verse, or milkmaids like Anne Yearsley or housemaids like Mary Leapor, or tradesmen, like Defoe. As Andreas Mueller writes in the preface to my translation:

Neglecting Defoe’s verse, even if only through a lack of availability in the current print market, means falling prey to the pitfalls – indeed, falling into the big holes - of the grand narrative of literary history. It means ignoring the actual nature of the literary milieu as Defoe’s contemporaries would have understood it and replacing it with a “sanitised”, strongly ideologically driven version of who wrote and who read, and what of that we should remember. It is also a misrepresentation of the nature of the oeuvre of one of the major canonical figures in English literature in a way that he would not have recognised in the least.

Like Andreas Mueller, I am convinced that Defoe’s verse is part and parcel of the author’s cultural heritage, and I thought that by translating *Caledonia*, I would enable an academic and non-academic readership to discover that neglected part of Defoe’s corpus, hence compensating the “distortions of the grand narrative of literary history” Mueller talks about. A problem with Defoe’s verse is its lack of availability, as Hunter underlines: “the poems themselves are hard to find; until the late twentieth century, almost all of them had been out of print for more than 250 years, and even now most are available in print only in scarce and expensive editions that even many research libraries do not own” (Hunter, 216). Indeed,

Caledonia was not easily available until Bob Owens and Philip Nicholas Furbank edited it, along with other political and economic Defoe writings in the fourth volume of Defoe's works at Pickering and Chatto in 2000, which is the edition I used for my translation, as it comes with rich and accurate notes generated by David Hayton, and that proved extremely useful to elucidate a number of historical allusions, and to constitute my own endnotes. 12

Caledonia, from poetical art to political arm

Caledonia is a 60 page-long "topographical poem" (Mueller, 131), made of 1265 lines – so it is a bit longer than *The True-Born Englishman*, which is 1216 lines long. This poem, in honour of Scotland and the Scottish people as the title suggests, praises the beauty of the Scottish landscapes and the heroic traditions of the population. There are three parts in this poem: the first one praises the natural resources of Scotland and lays stress on the coastal regions; the second part is more about the inland and the courage of the Scottish people, especially during battles. Finally, the third part praises the values of some noble Scottish families. Defoe's aim was to support Scotland and to "show Scotland's true Picture to the world" (Address to the Duke of Queensberry, 211). Contrary to the works on Scotland by Scott or Burns, Defoe's poems *Caledonia* and *The Vision* have hardly been commented on. Fewer than ten scholars have proposed critical readings of *Caledonia*: his four major biographers (Sutherland, Backscheider, Novak and Richetti) have integrated passages on this poem in their biographies, but no full-fledged chapter. David Hayton and Hans Otsman focused on the political context of the poem. Andreas Mueller is thus the only one who provided an extensive reading of the poem, its context, its form and its reception.

Most of Defoe's poems deal with political, economic or religious issues: his verse was a medium to express himself on serious topics. A text can be poetic even if it is not in verse, in the same way as a text in verse can have other preoccupations than poetry. In his use of the poetic form, Defoe's pragmatism was very palpable, and for many, the fact that he was prolific did not make up for his lack of talent:

When he does write poetry (and there is a period in his life when he wrote verse voluminously), he demonstrates an ability to reason articulately and rhyme readily but seldom creates smooth, satisfying harmonic lines or verse paragraphs with pleasures for the ear or eye: his lines vary between utter metric predictability and a rough and rugged uncertainty of rhythm that seems to result from impatience or haste (Hunter, 216).

Still according to Hunter, the typical poem of the eighteenth century is composed of couplets gathered in stanzas of different lengths, which gives the poem the irregular aspect of a conversation in prose:

If the poem we are reading is a typical eighteenth-century poem, it is probably in couplets – that is in pairs of lines rhymed with each other but not physically (and visually) set off from each other in discrete 2-line units. Rather, the spatial divisions are likely to involve paragraphs (as in prose) that are somewhat irregular in length, so that visually on the page there are something like stanzas (often with a line of space in between), but they are not of equal length, as stanzas usually are. The irregular blocks suggest the uneven progress of prose or conversation, an irregularity of pace within the symmetry. (Hunter, in Sitter, ed, 20).

In his address to the Parliament, Defoe pretends he is not tackling the topic of the Union in *Caledonia*, as if verse was not a means of conveying political messages and ideas: “I shall not concern the Union in this Discourse; so I take the Freedom to say here, the Union is noways concern'd in this Proposal” (*Caledonia*, 215). However, in between the lines dedicated to the praise of Scotland, Defoe’s political agenda as a pro-unionist crops up and the poem is a clever hypotext which prepares the publication of the six *Essays at Removing National Prejudice against a Union with Scotland* (all published in 1706 as well), *The History of the Union* (1709) and *Memoirs of the Church of Scotland* (1717), not to mention the many articles on the topic in the *Review*¹. He also tells Robert Harley about the objectives he has in this poem in the letter of the 2nd of November 1706:

I am writing a poem in praise of Scotland. You will say that is an odd subject, to bear a panegyrick, but my end will be answered. I make them believ I am come away from England, and resolv if the Union goes on to settle in Scotland, and all conduces to perswade them I am a friend to their country (*Letters*, 141).

Through the advice and remarks made through the poem, Defoe intends to “transform” the Scottish landscape and the involvement of the Scottish people: Scotland is waiting for that necessary transformation:

Behind this rugged Front securely lies	Derrière cette robuste protection côtière se
Old Caledonia, all the Worlds surprize.	trouve
Her native Beauty and her Wealth conceal'd	Caledonia, terre ancestrale, surprise que le
Waits the blest Hour when both shall be	monde découvre.
revealed.	Sa beauté naturelle et sa richesse cachées
	Attendent toutes deux l'heure bénite pour se

¹ 26 september 1706, volume III: “[w]hen pursuing the same general Good of his Native Country, the Author has embark'd in the great Affair of the Union of Britain.” Nb57, 11 may 1706 : “I am enclin'd to adjourn a little my intended Discourse on a Union with Scotland.” 28 sept 1706 : “[m]ethinks Union should have no Enemies”.

révéler.

Defoe was very agile in praising Scotland and the Scottish value in such a way as it would put this nation in a necessarily unionist context. All the beauty and wealth that pervade the stanzas of *Caledonia* are nothing outside the Union, as we can see in stanza 7 (“the Union, whereby Improvement shall reveal the hidden Fruitfulness of Scotland” / « L’Union, par laquelle l’amélioration révélera la fécondité cache de l’Écosse »).

That very strong political engagement in *Caledonia* made me wonder about the nature of Defoe’s verse and more largely, eighteenth-century verse: is it an art or an arm/a weapon? For Christine Gerrard, “the eighteenth century is regarded as the great age of political verse”, Sitter, 33), which is different from the horizon of expectation of the poetry reader of today. J-Paul Hunter says that “our expectations for poetry tend heavily towards the private, the personal, the emotional, and the lyrical, while eighteenth-century expectations tended toward the public, the social, the discursive, and the argumentative” (Hunter, in Sitter ed, 17).

Reading Caledonia today ?

Even if for a twenty-first-century French reader, the historical context of Scotland in 1706 seems quite distant, I think that it does not mean that he is not capable of appreciating Defoe’s verse. I have decided to keep and translate all of Defoe’s footnotes – which can surprise a little by the contrast between the factual, positivist aspect of the notes and the form of the poem, but I thought they would be helpful for the modern reader, if he wants to know a bit more about the different noble families alluded to, or the battles, in order to gauge more precisely the relationship between aesthetics and ideology. Also, the praise of Scotland and Scottish people is sort of timeless, as is pointed out by Hunter:

Defoe gets quickly to particulars in these poems, and one recurrent feature makes them quite readable today in spite of their detailed historical particularity. He fleshes out his satirical analysis of events and issues by peopling his poems with type-characters, often based on contemporaries who figured prominently in the actual events and issues of the time but then transformed to general, almost allegorical types whose character is dominated by a single characteristic or obsession, which Alexander Pope later popularized as a ‘ruling passion’ (Hunter, in Richetti ed, 227).

Translating Caledonia : choices, difficulties, shortcomings

One of the easiest conclusions I can draw from this translation experience (or experhymment), is that translating poetry – especially eighteenth century poetry, and especially Defoe’s eighteenth-century poetry (as we all know the liberties Defoe could take with the use of language) – is not an easy task! As W. H. Auden wrote in *Forewords and Afterwords*: “I very much doubt whether a Frenchman can ever learn really to hear a line of English verse”. So, before I started translating *Caledonia* I asked myself a number of questions such as: how can I translate an iambic pentameter into a French “alexandrine” without any loss? Can I/ Should I/ Must I keep the rhyme? Should I keep the verse form but change the meter?

I hesitated a lot for the choice of the alexandrine, for two main reasons: First, I did not want to favor the form to the detriment of meaning and I was afraid that would happen, because a French version is often longer than an English one, and I thought the two feet separating the alexandrine from the iambic pentameter would never be enough; secondly, I thought this resolution would be untenable for 1265 lines. But I thought I would try. I also thought it was worth trying to keep the rhyme, after having read developments in books on eighteenth-century poetry, on how poets used rhymes to denounce or satirize something: “satirists were, for example, fond of rhyming ‘kings’ with ‘things’ and ‘rule’ with ‘fool’” (Sitter ed, 20). But here and there in the poem, when sticking to the rhymed alexandrines was detrimental to the meaning of the poem, I opted for blank verse. Defoe does it himself sometimes. He also sometimes makes three lines rhyme together, and he underlines that change by using brackets:

But as our Modern Virtue stands as high,
 The present Worthies do the past supply;
 A certain Pledge, our Name shall never dy.

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Also, Defoe sometimes deliberately uses a shorter or a longer line, as in the end of the first stanza, and so I decided to do the same thing, and used an octosyllable and not an alexandrine for the last line, and for the 4th line, I kept the alexandrine but the length of Defoe’s line can be found in the repetition of “sans cesse”. Let’s have a closer look at that first stanza to tell you a bit more about the choices I made. Still in that first stanza, I have highlighted the stressed syllables in the first two lines of the English version, to lay emphasis on the rhythm created by the iambic pentameter, which, I’m afraid, is a bit lost in the alexandrine, even if a form of

rhythm is kept by the twelve feet in French. Another shortcoming is that I have not been able to always divide the alexandrine in the middle to create the balance 6 feet / 6 feet (as in lines 2 and 3). You can also notice an inversion of the look on line 3 to enable a visual (though imperfect) rhyme on line 4 (ravage/vague). I have transformed the alliteration in <w> that mimics the noise of the waves into an alliteration in <s> that mimics the sound of the wind. The alliteration in <d> that insists on the harshness of the climate is kept, and I translated “northern hights” by “Grand Nord” to lay stress on the exaggerations of the clichés, that are omnipresent in the first part of *Caledonia* and that tend to associate Scotland’s rough climate to the North Pole’s. Finally, to come back to the question ‘shall I keep the rhyme?’, we can notice that “reigns” rhymes with “disdains” (which is close to the quotation in which Sitter noticed that “rule” rhymed with “fool”), and in the second stanza “soil” will rhyme with “toil” to insist on the necessity for the Scottish population to use their abundant natural resources in order to make the soil more fruitful. And Defoe breaks the riming pattern at the end of the stanza to oppose very strongly “sun” and “ice”, so I did the same, and I thought that yes, the riming pattern might be something important to keep. 27

In Northern Hights, where Nature seldom smiles,	Dans le Grand Nord, où la Nature est peu docile,
Embrac'd with Seas, and <i>buttriss't round</i> with Isles,	Enlacée par des mers, protégée par des îles,
Where lofty Shores regard th'adjacent Pole,	Où le Pôle contigu regarde de hauts rivages,
Where Winds incessant blow, and Waves incessant roll;	Où sans cesse soufflent les vents, sans cesse déferlent les vagues ;
Where <i>Tyrant Cold</i> in <i>Glacy Ocean</i> reigns,	Où le froid règne en tyran dans les mers glacées,
And all the Habitable World disdains,	Et toute la terre habitée de dédaigner et
Defies the distant Influence of the Sun,	De défier la lointaine influence du soleil,
And <i>shines in Ice</i> . (Strophe 1)	De briller d'une lumière de glace.

Other words are often associated by the riming pattern in *Caledonia*, such as “trade” and “invade”, or “name” and “fame”, and it is easy to see the allusion to the colonial and commercial expansion or the renown and prestige of Scotland that could be improved if it exploited the resources it has and if it united with England. There are also changes in the riming pattern, as in stanza 24, with the use of alternate rhymes, which, added to the layout of the lines on the page, amplifies the idea of discord between the political parties that is the object of this stanza:

So jarring Parties in a State,	Ainsi des partis discordants dans un Etat,
By the Wise Conduct of the Crown,	Si la Couronne se conduit avec discernement,
Are manag'd to support the Magistrate,	Sont gouvernés pour soutenir les magistrats,
And fix that Power they struggle to pull	Et maintenir ce pouvoir qu'ils veulent réduire à

down.

néant.

So after having stated all this, I decided to keep the rhyme as long as the meaning was respected, but I had to give up sometimes, or to change the rhyming pattern, as in stanza 25, where I chose alternate rhymes instead of rhyming couplets (and you'll notice a visual rime on lines 1 and 3)

<i>Knowledge gives Courage, Science makes Men brave;</i>	La science donne de la bravoure, le savoir du courage;
Folly drives headlong <i>to the Grave</i> :	La folie conduit tout droit au mausolée :
For Ignorance and fear make Cowards run	Car l'ignorance et la peur font tomber les lâches
Into those Dangers they'r afraid to shun.	Dans ces dangers qu'ils ont peur d'éviter.

For the other difficulties I met, there were a couple of times when I think Defoe used the wrong word or verb, so I wondered if I had to do the same thing, but as it did not make any sense I decided to go for the word I thought he meant. For the vocabulary difficulties, I essentially used the dictionary of Samuel Johnson, along with a number of dictionaries online such as linguee or Le grand dictionnaire. And to find rimes and work on my alexandrine, I found the dictionary of synonyms CRISCO very useful. I also checked the Littré in order to avoid anachronisms.

Conclusion

So, that translation is an interpretation and a vision of this poem and I am happy I managed to find an editor to publish it, Honoré Champion ("Littérature anglaise" collection, directed by J-Pierre Naugrette) and to give it the editorial visibility that I think this poem deserves, and as Defoe intended "to rescue Scotland out of the Jaws of Slander" in *Caledonia*, I wish to do the same with the poem itself that is so rich, so instructive but unfortunately so neglected by French readers and critics. My translation is inscribed in a growing critical interest in non-canonical versifiers between 1690 and 1720, and the next issue of *Digital Defoe* will be on exactly that topic, the "in-between years" of the history of poetry, or the "missing years" between the conventionally conceived Ages of Dryden and Pope, and it will be edited by Andreas Mueller.

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