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## Modernising Desire: Translation and the Pornographic Text

The point of departure in this paper is the concept of dynamic equivalence, as defined by Eugene Nida and Charles Taber. Dynamic equivalence, according to Nida and Taber, is ‘the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language’.<sup>1</sup> The concept of dynamic (or functional) equivalence has come in for its fair share of criticism from other translation theorists; critics have, for instance, pointed out the impossibility of accurately determining the effect on the original target reader, an objection that is especially pertinent when considering older texts.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the matter of reader reaction and its transference across languages and time is a valid one, not least when considering texts that are affiliated with a genre that is defined by its very effect on the readers, such as comedy or horror fiction. Assuming then, for the sake of the argument, that it is possible (at least on a general level) to determine the effect of a text on the original readers, and that replicating this reaction is part of the translator’s task, the question is how the translator can transfer the emotional response of the source text readers to the target text readers in such a way that the reactions of the two groups are comparable to one another. Is it at all possible to achieve this goal while holding on to a recognisable linguistic version of the source text, or is it necessary to rewrite it to such a degree that it is no longer meaningful to talk of a translation, but of a completely new text – in effect, an adaptation or a rewrite?

In this paper I am going to use the example of pornography to address some problems facing a translator of one of the classics of pornographic literature, John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* from 1748–1749, better (though erroneously) known as *Fanny Hill*. The discussion stems from my own attempts to translate the work into Swedish, something that made me reflect on what to do about the pornographic aspect of the original text. Does it have an erotic effect

on modern English and Swedish audiences, or is the sexual excitement the text awoke in its eighteenth-century readers irrevocably lost today? That the text was capable of arousing its original readers is clear: James Boswell, for example, called it 'that most licentious and inflaming book',<sup>3</sup> and in 1785 it was claimed in the trial for adultery of Mrs Harriet Errington that she had taken great pleasure in reading *Memoirs* and in showing the many indecent pictures in it to her maid and to other people.<sup>4</sup> The procuress Mrs. Goadby is said to have used *Memoirs* in order to wear down the moral resistance of the girls she lured to her premises with the promise of hiring them as maids (but in reality to turn them into prostitutes), and the famous madam Jane Douglas's library supposedly included *Memoirs* together with other well-known works of bawdy and rogue literature, such as *Aristotle's Master-Piece*, *The London Bawd*, and *Rochester's poems*.<sup>5</sup> In *A Journey through the Head of a Modern Poet*, Cleland is satirised as a writer who had 'merited more in the cause of *Venus*, than half her Votaries, by his inimitable Collection of all the pretty Phrases, high-seasoned Metaphors, and inviting Allusions, which he has so judiciously made Use of, in that never-enough-to-be-admired Performance, called *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*', and the book itself is denounced in *Appendix: Or, the Criticks Criticised* as 'that infamous book that was burnt by the hands of the common hangman for debauching the principles and ruining the morals of the youth of both sexes not only by licentious and inflammatory descriptions, but also by lewd and libidinous pictures, that would disgrace the orgies of Cotytto', an expression of moral outrage far from uncommon at the time.<sup>6</sup> Whether they believed the book threatened to corrupt the morals of the innocent or celebrated it as an erotic masterpiece, it is clear that eighteenth-century readers viewed the text as a work capable of evoking a sexual response in the reader.

But what about now, some 250 years later? Looking into reader comments at net bookstores, blogs, and lists of recommended reading, the overall impression is one of widely divergent reactions to the book. For instance, one reader exclaims, 'Who knew erotica could be so boring! I ended up skimming through most of it to get AWAY from the sex scenes because they were so overexplained and redundant!' while another considers *Memoirs* to be 'way above any of the corny [...] trash people try to write now. The way he [Cleland] describes the exquisite male form and genitalia will make any true woman salivate. I absolutely loved what I found here'.<sup>7</sup> Many admit to having been surprised by the work's sexual explicitness: according to one reader, '*Fanny Hill* is one of the most pornographic pieces of writing I have ever read!', but others are more blasé: 'By today's standards, it seems pretty strange that this

relatively tame book was essentially outlawed in the civilized world for over 200 years'.<sup>8</sup> Some people find the book comic: one reader thinks it is 'dirty, all right, but what it mostly is, is hilarious' and another believes it is 'amusing and in a couple of places laugh-out-loud funny'. On the other hand, there are people who state that the descriptions in the book 'never appear either clinical or comical', and one reader finds it 'brilliant. Sensitively and well written'.<sup>9</sup> Whether the reviews are ultimately positive or negative, it seems that modern readers at least have no problem recognising the pornographic element in the text.

Contemporary readers have greater problems with the literary style. According to one reader, 'this was the most boring book I have ever tried to read. The language is hard to keep up with and understand', and another says that 'at times, it is difficult going because of the outdated language', while a third thinks the book 'read[s] like one very long run-on sentence'.<sup>10</sup> Some readers find the style unintentionally comic, provoking laughter rather than erotic titillation: one thinks that 'the descriptions of "engines" and "chinks" are overblown and hilarious', and another explains that 'I found it difficult to get through more than a few pages without laughing. Why? Because the author can't seem to come right out and say what he means, but has to describe it in the most strained, outlandish metaphors'.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, however, many people appear to have actually liked the style: one reader claims that 'Cleland's master-stroke, if you will, linguistically, is to write a whole-heartedly pornographic novel and couch everything in such a rich variety of metaphors', while another says that 'the author can makes [*sic*] you sizzle with every sentence without using one vulgar word. Most incredible! A master of the English language'.<sup>12</sup> If the comments on the web are anything to go by (and there is no knowing how representative they are), the erotic potential of *Memoirs* is fully recognised, many people still find it sexually arousing, but the style sometimes gets in the way of the erotic titillation and curtails it, especially because the language seems unintentionally humorous or ridiculous, or because the text is difficult to follow.

Forming an idea of how the book is viewed in Sweden is a less straight-forward task. There are only a small number of comments available online – the book is quite simply not part of literary and popular culture in the same way as it is in English-speaking countries. The few comments that do show up are often patronising or negative: according to one reader, the book contains 'wonderfully dorky sex; the maypoles are in bloom and so are all the other metaphors, the orgasms never end nor do the laughs. Luv it!'; while another feels that 'its reputation as pornography is exaggerated beyond belief. The book

changes (disappointed) owners at short intervals, I suspect', and a third contends that 'Cleland's novel makes for pretty boring reading. What becomes truly tiresome in the reading are the perpetually recurring far too many metaphors'.<sup>13</sup> About half of the comments are positive, however: one reader says, 'I think Cleland's *Fanny Hill* is pretty good at depictions of sex', while another says, 'I am a 59-year-old woman who has had a good deal of joy and inspiration from that book ever since I was in my twenties', and a third thinks that 'the novel was smashing', although 'the sentences are long, which makes it difficult to read'.<sup>14</sup> The limited number of comments in Swedish makes it difficult to draw general conclusions, but reactions do seem to vary as much as they do in English-speaking countries. As in Britain and the US, the Swedish comments suggest that although some people like *Memoirs*, many people find it boring, tiresome or ridiculous, and the recurring complaint is the language – primarily what is apparently viewed as silly or unnecessary 'euphemisms'.

The tendency to view the language as comic rather than licentious or sublime is the major difference between original and modern reader reactions, suggesting that the main issue faced by a translator aiming for dynamic equivalence is that of literary style. But what aspects of the original style would have to be altered, and is it possible to do so without changing the text in major ways? A short excerpt from the book will exemplify the reader-identified problem areas in the text – primarily sentence-length and metaphors (see Appendix).

The most immediately noticeable characteristic of the text is its tendency toward long sentences. The first sentence is comparatively short, 33 words, but the second has 141 words, and the third, 196. Such long sentences are not in any way unusual, or particular to the pornographic scenes: Cleland writes in this way, and it is a style that is relatively typical of eighteenth-century texts, even if Cleland can, with some fairness, be said to be unusually long-winded even among his contemporaries. A faithful translation of this text would offend in every conceivable way against the advice for writing Plain Swedish given by the Swedish Language Council (Språkrådet), although those rules were, of course, never meant for literary texts. Nevertheless, Språkrådet does recommend an average sentence length of 15–20 words. My translation ended up at 148 and 212 words, respectively, for the two longest sentences. The latter of these could perhaps be divided into three smaller sentences, landing at roughly 60 – 100 – 50 words per sentence, but it would be impossible to adhere to the 15–20 word recommendation. Hacking the sentence up into smaller pieces has another draw-back. Cleland's sentences are not usually run-on;

they either tend to descend through several levels of subordination and then finish the original main clause at the end, and/or they have a logical progression that makes division into smaller units less than straightforward. The various constituents of the sentence will have to be moved relative to one another, thus breaking up the logical progression of the sentence, and, in addition, it may be necessary to introduce deictic expressions to connect the new, shorter sentences with one another, something for which there is no need as long as the sentence stays undivided. The result is then a text that reads more like non-fiction, which is not a desirable goal; certainly this will not make the text more titillating to the reader. Also, the breathless subclause-upon-subclause structure may actually be on purpose, in that it can be said to mimic the increasing fervour of the sexual encounter that is taking place in the text. Dividing the sentence into smaller units may thus detract from the erotic effect rather than add to it.

The metaphors are the second problem a translator faces. Complex metaphors are a not uncommon feature of eighteenth-century texts, which on occasion tend to contain lengthy and well-developed conceits over a number of lines, but the frequency with which they appear is an idiosyncrasy of Cleland's text, born out of his avowed aim to '[write] so freely about a woman of the town without resorting to the coarseness of [...] plain words'.<sup>15</sup> His refusal to use these 'plain words' is one of the major differences between his text and modern porn/erotica, where four-letter words regularly appear, and it is the main reason quoted by readers on the web for why they found the text ridiculous or unintentionally comic. However, is it not a matter of just 'translating' each separate metaphor into the word to which it was meant to obliquely allude. As the text makes clear, the metaphors are much more far-reaching than that, e.g., 'that delicate glutton, my neither-mouth, as full as it could hold, kept palating, with exquisite relish, the morsel that so deliciously ingorg'd it'. Unless a translation was very free, it would have to deal with the entire conceit, not just individual words. But even individual metaphors can pose a problem. One example of this is the 'conduit-pipe'. The best option three separate translations into Swedish (my own and the two that were published in the 1960s) could come up with was 'ledningsrör' – which is hardly an erotic word (arguably less so than 'conduit-pipe').<sup>16</sup> Another problematic metaphor is the leech. Certainly to a modern audience likening the vagina to a leech does not have positive connotations, and runs the risk of undermining the sexual titillation the text may evoke; how it was seen by eighteenth-century readers we of course do not know, but one must remember that leeches were a much more common occurrence in the medicine of the

time, and most readers would probably have had first-hand experience of them. Because leeches were meant to cure, it is possible that they had positive connotations for the original readers. A modern reader, however, is probably more likely to be disgusted, a reaction that is not conducive to an erotic response. If the aim is dynamic equivalence, the most reasonable option would probably be to leave out this metaphor altogether – in fact, a great many of the metaphors would presumably have to be left out – but then what is left is hardly Cleland's text any longer. It is something else, and is that something really a translation?

Another thing to consider is the text as a historical document, and as a literary classic. If the translator should choose to modernise the text in pursuit of dynamic equivalence, she or he must by necessity give up on the arguably as significant objective of presenting a historical text as a document from its own time, as a text from which a modern reader can learn something about the period in which it was written. It must be considered whether it is not as important, or perhaps even more so, to show what eighteenth-century people found erotic than to make the text suit the erotic tastes of the modern reader. And aiming for dynamic equivalence is a slippery slope. If the text is to be modernised for erotic effect, one may ask if it should not also be recast as a story set in Sweden, with Swedish characters, in a contemporary setting, because the original reader obviously encountered a tale set in his or her own country featuring characters typical of his or her own society, something that reasonably has an impact on the effect on the reader. Additionally, it may be asked whether the events portrayed in the book would have the same effect now as then on the reader. If we are unwilling to entertain the notion that human beings react in the same fashion, regardless of historical period, to events depicted in literature and encountered in real life, must not then the whole story be changed as well? And if it does, what remains of the original text? Certainly this is a questionable treatment of a literary classic. Thus, if drawn to its logical conclusion, dynamic equivalence quickly becomes untenable as a method of translation. Even when the text belongs to a genre whose identity is inextricably bound up with a specific reader reaction, it is difficult to see that there is much to be gained by attempting to replicate that reaction on the modern reader – especially if that effect is attained at the cost of forcibly wringing the text from its historical location and turning it into a sham contemporary target-language original. In comparison, losing some of the dynamic equivalence in the process of translation seems a comparatively small price to pay.

*Appendix:*

*An excerpt from Memoirs and a suggestion for its translation*

This bred a pause of action, a pleasure stop; whilst that delicate glutton, my neither-mouth, as full as it could hold, kept palating, with exquisite relish, the morsel that so deliciously ingorg'd it. But nature could not long endure a pleasure that so highly provok'd without satisfying it; persuing then its darling end, the battery recommenc'd with redoubled exertion; nor lay I unactive on my side, but encountring him with all the impetuosity of motion I was mistress of, the downy cloathing of our meeting mounts, was now of real use to break the violence of the tilt; and soon, too soon indeed! the high-wrought agitation, the sweet urgency of this to-and-fro friction, rais'd the titillation on me to its height, so that finding myself on the point of going, and loath to leave the tender partner of my joys behind me, I employ'd all the forwarding motions and arts my experience suggested to me, to promote his keeping me company to our journey's end. I not only then tightened the pleasure-girth round my restless inmate, by a secret spring of suction and compression, that obeys the will in those parts, but stole my hand softly to that store bag of nature's prime sweets, which is so pleasingly attach'd to its conduit-pipe, from which we receive them; there feeling, and most gently indeed squeezing those tender globular reservoirs, the magic touch took instant effect, quicken'd, and brought on upon the spur, the symptoms of that sweet agony, the melting moment of dissolution, when pleasure dies by pleasure, and the mysterious engine of it overcomes the titillation it has rais'd in those parts, by plying them with the stream of a warm liquid, that is itself the highest of all titillations, and which they thirstily express, and draw in like the hot-natured leach, who, to cool itself, tenaciously attracts all the moisture within its sphere of exsuction: chiming then to me, with exquisite consent, as I melted away, his oily balsamic injection mixing deliciously with the sluices in flow from me, sheath'd and blunted all the stings of pleasure, whilst it flung us into an extacy, that extended us fainting, breathless, entranced.<sup>17</sup>

*Suggested translation:*

Detta gav upphov till ett avbrott i striden, ett njutningsuppehåll; medan den vällustiga frossaren, min nedre mun, som var till randen fullstoppad, hela tiden med intensivt välbehag smakade på munbiten som så läckert fyllde den till brädden. Men naturen kunde inte länge fördraga en njutning som eggade den så intensivt utan att tillfredsställa den; alltså strävade den efter sitt ömt älskade mål, och bombardemanget påbörjades

ånyo med fördubblad styrka; icke heller låg jag överksam å min sida, utan gick till storms mot honom med all den våldsamhet i rörelserna som jag förmådde, så att den duniga beklädnaden på våra sammanstötande kullar nu var till verklig nytta för att dämpa dustens våldsamhet; och snart, i sanning alltför snart! förhöjde den hetsiga stimuleringen, den ljuva ihärdigheten i denna upprepade gnidning fram och tillbaka, min upphetsning till dess höjdpunkt, så att jag befann mig vid utlösningens gräns; och då jag var ovillig att lämna mina fröjders kärleksfulle kamrat på efterkälken, begagnade jag mig av alla de befrämjande rörelser och konstgrepp som min erfarenhet föreslog mig för att verka för att han skulle hålla mig sällskap till resans slut. Alltså drog jag inte bara åt njutningsgördeln runt min rastlöse invånare med hjälp av en hemlig fjäder som styr sugkraften och sammandragningarna, och vilken lyder viljan i dessa delar, men jag förde dessutom varsamt och obemärkt handen till den påse i vilken naturens förnämsta sötvaror lagras, och vilken är så angenämt fäst vid sitt ledningsrör, från vilket vi erhåller dem; när jag där rörde vid, och i sanning mycket varsamt klämde på, de ömtåliga klotformade reservoarerna, hade den förtrollande beröringen omedelbar verkan, i det att den påskyndade, och genast framkallade, symptomen på den ljuva vända, upplösningens smältande ögonblick, när njutningen dör för njutningens hand, och dess gåtfulla drivkraft övervinner retelsen den har uppväckt i dessa delar genom att förse dem med ett flöde av varm vätska, vilken själv är den utsöktaste av alla retelser, och vilken de törstigt pressar ut, och suger upp likt den varmblodiga igeln, som för att svalka sig ihärdigt drar till sig all vätska inom sitt uppsugningsområde: då han nu alltså harmonierade med mig, med utsökt samstämmighet, när jag smälte bort, blandade sig hans lena, vederkvickande insprutning utsökt med det uppdämda flöde som strömmade från mig, och täckte och trubbad av alla njutningens styng, alltmedan den kastade in oss i en extas, som gjorde oss matta, andfädda, hänförda.

#### Noter

<sup>1</sup> Eugene Albert Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden: Brill, 1982, p. 24. The work was originally published in 1969.

<sup>2</sup> A good overview of various types of criticism of Nida's ideas can be found in Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 42–43.

<sup>3</sup> *Boswell for the Defence, 1769–1774*, edited by William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Frederick A. Pottle, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959, p. 81.



- <sup>4</sup> Anon., *The Trial of Mrs. Harriet Errington*, London: R. Randall, 1785, p. 49.
- <sup>5</sup> Anon., *Memoirs of the Celebrated Miss Maria Brown*, 2 vols, London: I. Allcock, 1765, vol. 2, pp. 156–67; Anon., *Genuine Memoirs of the Late Celebrated Jane D—s*, London: J. Simpson, 1761, p. 84.
- <sup>6</sup> Anon., *A Journey through the Head of a Modern Poet*, London: W. Owen, 1750, p. 18; Robert MacFarlan, *Appendix: Or, The Criticks Criticised*, London: n. pub., 1777, p. 20.
- <sup>7</sup> ‘Vanessa’ on *Goodreads*, ‘Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure’ (Penguin Popular Classics edn) webpage; ‘Lianne79’ at *Feedbooks*, ‘Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure’ webpage, both accessed 23 Aug 2010.
- <sup>8</sup> ‘A Customer’, ‘18th Century pornography!’ on *Amazon.co.uk*, ‘Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (Classics)’ webpage, and ‘Ivan’ on *Goodreads*, *supra* note 7, both accessed 23 Aug 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> ‘benshlomo’, ‘Laughing All the Way to Bed’ on *Amazon.com*, ‘Fanny Hill: Memoirs Of A Woman of Pleasure (Wordsworth Classics)’ webpage; ‘Ivan’, *op. cit.*; ‘preshant pervatikal’ and ‘David’ on *ManyBooks.net*, ‘Fanny Hill’ webpage, all accessed 23 Aug 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> ‘Debra A. Miller “Debi Scarbrough”’, ‘Fanny Hill Woman of Pleasure’ and ‘Michael Cornett “Madman”’, ‘A worthy classic’, both on *Amazon.com*, ‘Fanny Hill: Or, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (Penguin Classics)’ webpage; ‘Nicholas Gourlay’ on *Goodreads*, *supra* note 7, all accessed 23 Aug 2010.
- <sup>11</sup> ‘A reader’, ‘This is a naughty one, alright’ and ‘benshlomo’ on *Amazon.com*, *supra* note 9, accessed 24–23 Aug 2010.
- <sup>12</sup> ‘simonfl’, ‘How to write about sex without being vulgar’ on *Amazon.ca*, ‘Penguin Classics Fanny Hill Or The Memoirs Of A Woman Of Pleasure’ webpage; ‘Melvin Pena’, ‘Lascivious! Unbelievable! An Erotic Literary Classic’ on *Amazon.com*, ‘Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (Oxford World’s Classics)’ webpage, all accessed 24 Aug 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> ‘Carina Rydberg’ on *Boktipset*, ‘Fanny Hill’ webpage; Peter Harold, ‘Sveriges största bordell?’ on *Peter Harold – Läsarnas blogg*; Petter Malmberg, ‘Fanny Hill’ on *Butter tar ordet* (my translations), all accessed 24 Aug 2010.
- <sup>14</sup> ‘M.’, a comment on Malte Persson’s ‘Dåligt sex i år igen’ on *Malte Persson: Errata*; ‘Gun’, ‘Erotiskt lästips från Gun’ on *ViLÅSER*; Nathalie Andersson on her untitled blog site ‘nemja.blogg.se’ (my translations), all accessed 23–24 Aug 2010. It is not usually made clear whether the Swedish reviewers and commentators had read the book in Swedish or in English, which may of course have affected their appreciation of the text.

<sup>15</sup>*Boswell, Laird of Auchinleck, 1778–1782*, edited by Joseph W. Reed and Frederick A. Pottle, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977, pp. 76–77.

<sup>16</sup>The two translations are *Fanny Hill: en glädjeflickas memoarer*, translated by Roland Adlerberth, Stockholm: Bonniers, 1965, reissued in 1982 and 1985, and *Fanny Hill: en glädjeflicka berättar*, translated by Nore Hell, Stockholm: Elephant Press, 1963. The latter version has been significantly shortened.

<sup>17</sup>John Cleland, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, edited by Peter Sabor, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 82–83. The spelling has not been modernised.