

¶ Kristian Smidt: *Ibsen Translated: A Report on English Versions of Henrik Ibsen's Peer Gynt and A Doll's House*. Oslo: Solum forlag, 2000. 125 Pp. ISBN 82-560-1210-2.

The art of translation is a delicate one which demands a great deal of those who practise it. Sometimes translators might have felt that their work has not been taken seriously or been given enough recognition. But with more university departments in translation studies being opened, both the theory of translation and an apparatus for the critique of translation is being developed.

Views on a translator's task will vary and there are those who would feel inclined to give him or her a very free hand in relation to the source text. Kristian Smidt is fairly traditional when formulating his general criteria for a good translation:

1. a translation should be as faithful to the original in every respect as is consistent with the natural properties, if not the strict properties, of the target language.
2. a translation should obey the dictates of genre, whether prosaic, lyric or dramatic - and in the case of the two works studied here a dramatic dialogue intended to be spoken on the stage should recognize the requirements of the theatre. (pp. 11-12)

Both these criteria are open to wide interpretation. Also, in view of the

second criterion, the selection of *Peer Gynt* is surprising. "I don't think the play's for acting", Ibsen once said.

Smidt's survey covers 19 *Peer Gynt* translations and 15 translations of *A Doll's House*, but about a third of them he eliminates from scrutiny, i.e. when they are adaptations or incomplete.

Considering the author's first translation criterion, it is clear that the relationship between faithfulness to the original and consistency with the properties of the target language is a problematic one. There is hardly ever a true model translation that everybody concerned can accept. The lack of consensus is striking. On the whole, Smidt gives more consideration to the "faithfulness to the original" criterion and the best sections of his study are the ones giving a detailed commentary on the cultural and social background necessary for providing the reader/translator with the material for a proper understanding of the text. Similarly, the "faithfulness" aspect is in the foreground when he discusses the misunderstandings of Norwegian idioms that he has found when scrutinizing the translations. It is possible here that a translator has made a deliberate variation in the target language text, but on the whole the examples of 'misunderstood' idiomatic phrases are genuine mistakes, made because the translator did not have enough knowledge or enough information about Ibsen's idiom. These are useful sections for the prospective translator and non-Norwegian Ibsen scholar.

Smidt's second criterion for a good translation states that a dramatic dialogue intended to be spoken on the stage should recognize the requirements of the theatre. The chapter on *Peer Gynt* has sections on rhythm and rhyme and discusses the problems of conveying Ibsen's metric patterns, with implications for "faithfulness" and "speakability". He examines styles of speech in relation to the different characters and how the levels of style change through the play, from the colloquial idiom of Acts I-III and the would-be sophisticated speech of Act IV to the earnest and reflective discourse of Act V. But, on the whole, Smidt does not specifically distinguish between the reader and the spectator when it comes to analysing the text and account for the particular demands of a stage performance.

This is the case also in the chapter about *A Doll's House*. Here he concentrates on character portrayal, but his comments do not particularly

distinguish between text and performance. Yet, his analysis is sensitive and gives an insight into the way the characters reveal their personalities through their mode of expression. An Ibsen character is often connected with a key word or a key expression, which takes on a special meaning. The repetition of such a word, where the meaning of it can vary slightly, but still give the reader/spectator the clear association, is all-important. Often enough the translator seems to abhor repetition and will seek to find substitutes for the sake of variation. A case in point is Nora's "det vidunderlige", difficult to translate, but crucial, especially in its repetition.

Kristian Smidt's survey shows how easy it is to let misunderstandings of both linguistic and cultural features through the net. His examples should give the hopeful translator a sense of true humility, and his modest claim is that the book might be useful for prospective translators. He also wishes that translators would collaborate more. This might be a vain hope, but there is already a context where translators and advisers work as a team, and that is in the theatre where it is now increasingly the norm to work out a new translation for each new production. Notable here are the several Ibsen productions where professor Inga-Stina Ewbank has worked together with the directors Peter Hall and John Barton and also with the actors to provide a new version suitable for the English stage.

It would have been useful to have had a bibliography of works dealing with Ibsen translation included in the book. As it is, a few publications are mentioned in the notes and the Ibsen translations scrutinized are, of course, listed in full, but worth mentioning on the scholarly side are, for instance, Thomas F. Van Laan's 'English Translations of *A Doll House*' in Yvonne Shafer (ed.), *Approaches to Teaching Ibsen's A Doll House* (1985), Egil Törnqvist's 'Translating *Et Dukkehjem*' in his *Ibsen: A Doll's House* (1995) and Sara Jan's 'William Archer's Translations of Ibsen, 1889-1908' in *Scandinavica*, 34:1, 1995.

Kristian Smidt says in his introduction that in this book he sees no need to go into translation theory. He takes a pragmatic approach, and his findings have provided him with material for a sensitive and lucid commentary on translation problems in connection with two central works in Ibsen's dramatic oeuvre. The book will be most useful to the serious student of Ibsen's work.

*Kerstin Petersson*, Norwich