HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Creative Translator

***Creativity and Originality in J.A. Thompson's Translation of Halldór Laxness'* Sjálfstætt fólk**

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Þýðingafræði

Abigail Charlotte Cooper

Maí 2014

Háskóli Íslands

Íslensku- og menningardeild

Þýðingafræði

The Creative Translator

Creativity and Originality in J.A. Thompson's Translation of Halldór Laxness' Sjálfstætt fólk

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Þýðingafræði

Abigail Charlotte Cooper

Kt.: 100888-4919

Leiðbeinandi: Gauti Kristmannsson

Maí 2014

ABSTRACT

This thesis is about J.A. Thompson's translation of Halldór Laxness' *Sjálfstætt fólk* into English, and specifically about the idea of creativity and originality in the translation process.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is an introduction containing background information about Halldór Laxness, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, J.A. Thompson and his translation, *Independent People*. The second chapter explores how the ideas of loss and gain, success and failure in translation have been traditionally approached in such a manner as to rule out the possibility of creativity. In the third chapter I examine the idea of a creative translator as an alternative approach to translation theory. The fourth and fifth chapters are close comparisons of *Independent People* and *Sjálfstætt fólk* in which I explore evidence of creativity and originality in Thompson's solutions to common challenges faced by literary translators. The fourth chapter focuses on the problem of restricted vocabulary in the target language and the fifth cultural aspects of translation. The final chapter is a summary and conclusion.

ÚTDRÁTTUR

Ritgerð þessi fjallar um þýðingu J.A. Thompson á Sjálfstæðu fólki eftir Halldór Laxness og sér í lagi um hugmyndina um sköpunargáfu og frumleika í þýðingaferlinu.

Ritgerðin skiptist í sex kafla. Fyrsti kaflinn er inngangskafli og hefur að geyma bakgrunnsupplýsingar um Halldór Laxness, Sjálfstætt fólk, J.A. Thompson og þýðingu hans, Independent People. Í öðrum kafla er rannsakað hvernig hefð hefur verið fyrir því að nálgast hugmyndirnar um velfarnað og mistök í þýðingum með þeim hætti að vísa möguleikanum á sköpunargáfu á bug. Í þriðja kafla kanna ég hugmyndina um skapandi þýðanda sem annan möguleika á nálgun í stað hefðbundinna þýðingakenninga. Í fjórða og fimmta kafla er gerður ítarlegur samanburður á Independent People og Sjálfstæðu fólki þar sem ég skoða merki um sköpunargáfu og frumleika í lausnum Thompson á þeim ögrandi viðfangsefnum sem bókmenntaþýðendur standa gjarnan frammi fyrir. Í kafla fjögur er sjónum beint að takmörkuðum orðaforða í markmálinu og í kafla fimm er athyglinni beint að menningarlegum þáttum þýðinga. Lokakaflinn inniheldur samantekt og niðurlag.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 2: THE TRANSLATOR'S INEVITABLE FAILURE 6

CHAPTER 3: THE CREATIVE TRANSLATOR 13

CHAPTER 4: WEATHER VOCABULARY AND CREATIVITY 26

CHAPTER 5: CREATIVITY AND CULTURE IN TRANSLATION 41

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION 58

BIBLIOGRAPHY 60

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1945, the English translation of Halldór Laxness' novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* was published in London under the title *Independent People*. The translator was one James Anderson Thompson, a failed academic and hotelier from Berwick-upon-Tweed. J.A. Thompson, as he is more generally known, studied English and Old Norse at the University of Leeds, before abandoning his doctoral thesis on James Joyce's *Ulysses* and taking a position in Akureyri, where he taught at the Grammar School between 1931 and 1932. He was described by Laxness himself as a "harðgáfaður maður vel íslenskufær".[1] Likewise, Gísli Már Gíslason, who knew Thompson from his time as a student in Newcastle, wrote that he spoke "mjög góða íslensku, það góða að hann hefði geta ferðast um Ísland eins og Rasmus Christian Rask forðum, án þess að nokkur tæki eftir því að hann væri útlendingur".[2] This was by no means the case for all of Laxness' translators; many simply translated other translations rather than working from the Icelandic original. Although *Independent People* was the second of Laxness' novels to be published in English, it was the first to have been translated directly from the Icelandic. *Salka Valka* had been published in 1936, but F.H. Lyon translated from the Danish edition.

Despite the advantage of knowing Icelandic, it seems that the task of translating *Sjálfstætt fólk* was an arduous one. This was the only translation that Thompson ever

[1] Halldór Laxness, *Skáldatími* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1993), p. 212.
[2] Gísli Már Gíslason, 'Enskur þýðandi Sjálfstæðs fólks', *Morgunblaðið Menningarblað/Lesbók*, 28 March 1998, p. 20.

undertook, and he worked on it for eight years. In his autobiographical work *Skáldatími*, Laxness famously described a worn-out Thompson celebrating the completion of the project:

> […] þá var það fyrsta verk hans að kaupa sér svuntu skrubbu og skólpfötu og fara að þvo stigana í hóteli nokkru af fimta flokki í Lundúnaborg; þótti honum slíkur starfi hátíð hjá því að þýða Halldór Laxness handa Sir Stanley og mátti aldrei framar bók sjá eftir það.[3]

When people comment on the subject, the general opinion seems to be that Laxness is a particularly challenging author to translate, a writer with a unique style and so essentially Icelandic that, in some way, his work cannot function once removed from an Icelandic language context. He himself considered many of his books to be "illþýðanlegar".[4] Reviews of later English translations by Magnus Magnusson abound with comparable comments. For example, Richard N. Ringler wrote that "Halldór Laxness is notoriously difficult to translate: he has created for himself a unique and idiosyncratic style, many of whose effects are premised upon his Icelandic readers' life-long intimacy with their native language and its idiom",[5] whilst Loftur Bjarnason felt that "certain words and expressions are so much a part of the cultural heritage of the particular group that to translate them into their literal equivalents of another language group is to make them sound emasculated and grotesque".[6]

It seems, though, that for all it exhausted him Thompson rose admirably to this challenge. Laxness himself has described his hard work as a translator, and dedication

[3] *Skáldatími*, p. 213.
[4] *Ibid*, p. 159.
[5] Richard N. Ringler, Review of *World Light*, *Books Abroad*, 44.3 (1970), p. 495.
[6] Loftur Bjarnason, Review of *World Light*, *Scandinavian Studies*, 42.2 (May 1970), pp. 216-217.

to ensuring that the final product was the best that it could possibly be. An image emerges of Thompson as something of a perfectionist who approached his source text with an extraordinary level of sensitivity:

> Ég hitti hann margsinnis á því árabili sem þessi bók hélt honum í heljargreipum. Hann spurði margs og gat ekki hugsað sér að láta nokkra setningu frá sér fara fyrr en hann var viss um að ekki væri hægt að gera betur og öllum blæbrigðum frumtextans til skila haldið.[7]

Whether this is in fact an accurate portrayal of Thompson's working methods or not is difficult to say – no account from the translator himself is available. However, it is clear that Thompson benefited a great deal from the close contact that he had with Laxness at various points throughout the translation process. One of Laxness' biographers, Halldór Guðmundsson, wrote:

> En honum [Thompson] veitti ekki af hjálpinni því næstum á hverri síðu í þessari bók, þar sem tungumálið er einstaklega fjölbreytt og sótt í margar áttir, voru orð eða setningar sem Thompson skildi ekki.[8]

It seems though that Laxness was more to Thompson than simply a resource to clarify points of vocabulary. What also emerges from Laxness' accounts is evidence of a collaborative approach to the project, although of course the lion's share of the work fell to Thompson. In a letter of 1936, he described a stay with Thompson: "Hann hefur átt í miklum erfiðleikum með þýðinguna og er að ljúka fyrra bindið. Við sitjum við öllum stundum, þegar hann hefur tíma, og lesum saman þýðinguna".[9] As an author,

---

[7] Halldór Laxness, quoted in Ólafur Ragnarsson, *Til fundar við skáldið Halldór Laxness* (Reykjavík: Veröld, 2007), p. 162.
[8] Halldór Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness: Ævisaga* (Reykjavík: JPV, 2004), p. 390.
[9] Halldór Laxness, quoted in *Halldór Laxness: Ævisaga*, p. 390.

Halldór Laxness seems to have been something of a translator's dream. It is evident that he took the translation and publication of his work abroad very seriously, and played an active role in these processes when he was able to. He explained to Ólafur Ragnarsson:

> Það er ekki nóg að skrifa bækur, höfundur verður líka að vera tilbúinn til að fara yfir þær er þær rata út fyrir landsteina svo að upphaflegt efni komist nokkurn veginn óbrenglað á leiðarenda. Jú ég sat löngum stundum með þýðurum í þeirra heimalöndum, einkum framan af ferlinum. Þessar setur gátu orðið æði langar.[10]

In this instance, the joint efforts of translator and author paid dividends. While many reviews, as tends to be the case with literary reviews of translated works, treated *Independent People* as if it were the original work of Halldór Laxness, what specific comments that were made on the translation were favourable. Laxness wrote that "þýðing hans á Sjálfstæðu fólki er með meirum ágætum en flestar þýðingar sem gerðar hafa verið á mínum bókum í nokkru landi og hefur af dómbærum mönnum í Einglandi verið talin meðal snildarverka í enskum þýðingabókmentum fyr og síðar".[11] More generally speaking, the novel achieved great success in English. It is safe to say that in the English-speaking world, *Independent People* is still the best known and most popular of Laxness' works. Both *Independent People* and the English translation of *Salka Valka* were initially received to great critical acclaim. Indeed, according to Laxness, *Salka Valka* earned him the greatest acclaim in the UK of all his books, despite a disappointing performance in the USA.[12] This success, however, was relatively short-lived; the English edition of *Salka Valka* has been out of print for over fifty years. *Independent People*, on the other hand, did well on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1946,

---

[10] Halldór Laxness, quoted in *Til fundar við skáldið Halldór Laxness*, p. 159.
[11] *Skáldatími*, p. 212.
[12] *Ibid*, p. 217.

the year following its original publication, Thompson's translation came out in New York, where it became a bestseller and was chosen by the Book of the Month Club. When Laxness won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955, the position of *Independent People* as a minor classic, albeit a relatively little-known classic, of twentieth century literature was secured. Whilst many more of his novels have been subsequently translated, none has yet achieved the success of J.A. Thompson's *Independent People*.

In this dissertation I intend to examine the ways in which Thompson responded to the challenge of translating Halldór Laxness' *Sjálfstætt fólk*. In particular, I am interested in the possibly counter-intuitive idea of translation as creative and original writing. In the process of translating *Sjálfstætt fólk* to the English *Independent People*, a wholly new text was created, and I want to find out what was lost, and what, if anything, was gained in that process. I hope that through a comparison of the two texts and investigation of the choices that Thompson made, I will be able to provide an answer to the question of whether *Independent People* can be considered a creative and original piece of literature in its own right.

CHAPTER 2

THE TRANSLATOR'S INEVITABLE FAILURE

In one way or another, the concept of 'loss' has dominated Western thinking on the topic of translation for centuries. Loss is indeed an inevitable result of the translation process, since any attempt to translate a text from one language into another will always result in a different text. Despite the best efforts of the most skilful translator, not everything that was present in the source text will be present in the target text; it is simply a linguistic impossibility. This phenomenon has generally been seen in rather negative terms. If the text has lost something in the process of translation, the implied assumption is that a translation is automatically a poorer text than the original.

To understand the roots of this line of thinking, it is necessary to consider Western ideas about originality and authorship. Until relatively recently, translation has been seen in terms of what André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett call the Jerome Model, which is "characterised by the presence of a central, sacred text, that of the Bible, which must be translated with the utmost fidelity".[13] The Bible is obviously a special case; taking the premise that this particular book contains the word of God, it follows that changes to that text can be interpreted as tantamount to blasphemy, since they distort the divine voice and place a linguistic barrier between God and man. Similar principles have nevertheless been applied to the translation of other texts. Original texts of any kind have been approached as if they were sacred, every word and sentence written by

[13] Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, 'Where are we in Translation Studies?', *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, ed. by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (Clevedon: Cromwell Press, 1998), p. 2.

an original author fixed and inviolable, and the ideal of translation therefore to produce a text that preserves exactly every feature of the original. Gain in translation is mentioned far more infrequently than loss, but even so it is often framed in equally negative terms. Anything that is present in the target text that was *not* present in the source text is a failure on the same grounds as a loss: the translator has placed a barrier between the reader of the translation and the author's message, distorting the artistic integrity of the work. The sacred word of the author, the word of God as it were, must be transmitted in its purest possible form.

Philo Judaeus' account of the creation of the Septuagint is an interesting example of this idealism, as it was applied to actual Bible translation. Around the year 20 B.C. he described how seventy-two individual translators, working independently and in isolation, managed to produce identical Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures:

> Sitting here in seclusion with none present save the elements of nature, earth, water, air, heaven, the genesis of which was to be the first theme of their sacred revelation, for the laws begin with the story of the world's creation, they became as it were possessed and, under inspiration, wrote, not each several scribe something different, but the same word for word, as though dictated to each by an invisible prompter.[14]

This was a distortion of an older version of the tale, in which the final translation was the collaborative work of seventy-two translators working together. Philo Judaeus'

[14] Philo Judaeus, 'The Creation of the Septuagint', trans. by F.H. Colson, in *Western Translation Theory: From Herodotus to Nietzsche*, ed. by Douglas Robinson (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997), p. 14.

version is a mythical ideal (it almost goes without saying that the Greek text produced by the seventy-two translators was also identical to the original in every conceivable way); in practice we know that more than one translator working on any but the shortest, simplest text will inevitably produce more than one translation. Still, the idea of the one, true, perfect translation, "precisely because it could never be realised, […] continued to haunt translators and those who thought about translation over the centuries".[15] Barring the miracle of divine intervention, the Jerome Model essentially rules out success in translation; the most successful translators are the ones who most effectively mitigate their own unavoidable failure.

These ideals have inexorably informed the position of the author and of the translator, as well as the relationship between the two figures. Original authors create and through that creativity express themselves, their personalities and individuality, whereas translators copy and must avoid expressing themselves at all costs. The ideal of the Jerome Model dictates that there be nothing of the translator in the translation, that translators surrender their identities to the best of their abilities and thereby become empty channels through which the ideas and personalities of the original authors may flow unimpeded. The fact that we know that seventy-two different translators will produce seventy-two different translations tells us how unrealistic this is, yet it is not uncommon to see translations praised for passing as a text which was originally written in that language. Which of course all translations are, but the compliment is not intended in that spirit. It is rather a way of saying that the best translation is the text the original author would have written had he or she spoken the target language.

[15] Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, 'Where are we in Translation Studies?', *Constructing Cultures*, p. 2.

In more recent years, one of the most significant attacks on this chimerical ideal translation, which does not appear to be a translation at all, has come from Lawrence Venuti. In his highly influential work, *The Translator's Invisibility*, he argues that:

> A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the "original".[16]

Acceptance of this illusion in turn legitimises the practice of treating a translated text as the work of the original author and essentially removing the translator from the equation. Venuti, amongst others, has written about the absurdity of the majority of what literary reviewers say about translations. He argues that translations are erroneously judged, by those who are in fact in no position to judge, not having compared the translation to the original (and usually lacking the linguistic knowledge necessary to do so), on the grounds of 'fluency'. Venuti himself takes an explicitly political stance on the issue, arguing that Anglo-American culture actively works to maintain the marginalised status of translation and translators, and aggressively promotes monolingualism whilst rejecting the foreign.

Is it then irrelevant that *Independent People* should have been judged as among the works of genius in the history of English literary translation, and on what basis can *Independent People* be said to be a successful translation? Venuti advocates changes to

[16] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.

the practice of translation, namely the use of foreignising strategies that move the reader towards the source language rather than moving the original author towards the target language, in order to combat the translator's invisibility, to make it clear to the reader that a text is a translation, is foreign. According to these criteria, *Independent People* could easily be judged as a poor translation, for it does not call attention to the fact that it is a translation; the surface structure of Thompson's English is undeniably English (one might call it fluent English) rather than Icelandic. Venuti's argument undeniably has merit, and addresses the specific political concerns that he himself has along with other issues such as blandness and stylistic levelling in translated prose. However, it does seem to boil down to another submissive approach to translation, another variation on the old model. Venuti's ideal translator merely makes his or her submission to the original more transparent, and arguably more complete. Whilst it does indeed seem unfounded for a monolingual reviewer to make any comment on the actual translation process, we can at least accept that *Independent People* (as distinct from *Sjálfstætt fólk*) is generally evaluated as a very fine novel. As an English-language text, it is successful. Within traditional frameworks of translation success, however, the quality of the translated text as an independent work of art does not (theoretically at least) carry much weight.

Various other strategies have been devised in order to deal with the apparent impossibility of successful translation, yet most of them centre rather around the mitigation of failure than redefining success. The popular concept of 'equivalence', for example, has been extremely important within the young discipline of Translation Studies. Essentially, it is a more systematic approach to the centuries long opposition

between ‘literal’ and ‘free’ translation strategies. A famous example of ‘dynamic equivalence’, as it was termed by the Bible translator Eugene A. Nida, is that of substituting the ‘lamb of God’ for a seal when translating for the Inuit. In this case, the literal image of the lamb is lost, but Nida hopes to preserve the image of an innocent, peaceful animal well-known to the text’s target audience, and so produce a translation that is equivalent in terms of the effect it has on the reader. The other side of the coin is ‘formal equivalence’, when the translator seeks to preserve the surface structures of the source language to as great a degree as possible.

Many variations on this theme have been explored within Translation Studies, some going into great detail concerning the technical linguistic aspects of conveying the same information in different languages, some expanding the list of different kinds of equivalence or suggesting various different strategies by which equivalence may be achieved. The details of these theories lie outside the scope of this thesis. Essentially, though, the equivalence paradigm, however it may be expressed, in practical terms may usually be simplified as the idea that certain features of a text in the source language will have an equivalent in the target language. Perfect equivalence in all textual features is not possible, so the translator must make a choice, usually between prioritising equivalent form or equivalent effect (although many subcategories and variations exist). The two strategies are not opposing poles, though, rather matters of giving precedence to different textual features. Whether leaning towards formal or dynamic equivalence, translators must select what they consider to be the most important features of the source text, be they points of style, imagery, semantics, or anything else, and aim to reproduce these features in the target text, necessarily at the expense of others. In other

words, partial success can be achieved on condition of sacrificing success in other areas; translators must pick their battles and prioritise accordingly. In itself, the truth of this model is undeniable, but it remains confined by the assumption that differences between the source text and target text are not only unavoidable, but inherently negative. Even Lawrence Venuti, who has been so instrumental in calling attention to the problems of viewing translation as a derivative activity, asserts that all translation is an act of violence against the original text.[17] His proposals, and all those strategies that fall within the equivalence paradigm, are simply ways to mitigate that violence, which nevertheless cannot be wholly avoided.

[17] *The Translator's Invisibility*, p 24.

CHAPTER 3

THE CREATIVE TRANSLATOR

Gradually over the course of the twentieth century, an alternative approach to translation has emerged alongside the equivalence paradigm. Challenges have been mounted against the concept of equivalence, the sacred original has been destabilised and ideas about creativity and originality in translation have begun to be seen more and more frequently. These ideas can offer a liberating change of perspective, opening up the possibility of genuine success in translation rather than merely minimalised failure, of the translator as a writer in his or her own right rather than a faithful servant or depersonalised mouthpiece for the original author. In other words, the translator figure has emerged as a creative agent. Translated literature can be literature in its own right, texts which are not necessarily poorer than their originals, and possibly even richer.

The idea of the translator as creative is not a completely new one. It has been around since the classical era. Admittedly, classical thinkers often wrote about translation as an imitative exercise, but one which would improve the translator's own ability as an original writer, and expand the limits of Latin through the import of foreign features. Pliny the Younger even suggested that the possibility that a translation could be a more successful text than its original, advising Fuscus Salinator in a letter of c. 85 A.D.:

> You may also sometimes choose a passage you know well as try to improve on it. This is a daring attempt, but does not presume too far when it is made in private; and yet we see many people entering this type of contest with great

> credit to themselves and, by not lacking confidence, outstripping the authors whom they only intended to follow.[18]

This is a fairly tentative proposal, and it is evident that in a more general sense, the idea of the creative translator was not accepted. Cicero, for example, had to defend the value of his Latin translations as independent texts, against those who would deem a translation a poor substitute, completely unnecessary when one might just as well read the original Greek. It is worth noting that his translations were written in a context where the educated elite would be capable of reading both the original Greek and the translated Latin, where both texts would exist side by side. This is not the case for most modern literary translation, where it is generally presumed that the reader of the translation does not possess the linguistic knowledge required to access the original, and yet this attitude seems just as widespread now in the twenty-first century as it was in Cicero's time: translation is necessary when one does not speak the language of the original, but it is always second-best and the reading experience of those who have access to the original is in some way more pure, more true.

The idea of the creative translator has been used by translation scholars to challenge such assumptions. Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella have argued that traditional roles and relationships concerning authors and translators are by no means inevitable:

> […] the polarity between an 'original writing and its translation is not ontologically determined; rather the derivative status of translation reflects socio-cultural power relations.

[18] Pliny the Younger, 'Imitation of the Best Models', trans. by Betty Radice, in *Western Translation Theory*, p. 18.

> […]
>
> From the hierarchy of original and copy ensues the vertical relationship of author and translator, demarcating the author's literary creativity (as production, originality and innovation) from the submissiveness of the translator, whose task is to transmit and preserve form and meaning intact at the same time (translation as reproduction and derivation).[19]

It seems that according to popular perceptions, as soon as an author releases a work of literature, it 'freezes', as it were; the fluidity of the creative process solidifies, the finished product takes on an forbidding finality and any further alterations (such as those which occur through translation) are violations. At the same time, Paul Valéry's oft restated and paraphrased assertion that a literary work is never finished, only abandoned, has become an accepted truism. Jacques Derrida, amongst others, has pointed out that the original text is not a monument set in stone which must necessarily be vandalised by translation, but a living thing that can grow through translation:

> Translation has nothing to do with reception or communication or information […] the translator must assure the survival, *which is to say the growth*, of the original. Translation augments and modifies the original, which, insofar as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow. It modifies the original even as it modifies the original language. This process – transforming the original as well as the translation – is the translation contract between the original and the translating text.[20]

---

[19] *Translating and Creativity: Perspectives on Creative Writing and Translation Studies*, ed. by Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 3.
[20] Jacques Derrida, *Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. by Christie V. McDonald, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 122.

Susan Bassnett has used similar imagery in suggesting that translation need not be seen as an act of violence on a sacred text, but on the contrary, a way to renew a piece of literature and give it new life. In an essay on translating poetry, she criticises "Robert Frost's immensely silly remark that 'poetry is what gets lost in translation'"[21] and invokes the metaphor of transplanting a seed, inspired by a quotation from Percy Bysshe Shelley:

> […] it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower – and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.

Bassnett subverts the usual interpretation of this passage, that translation of poetry is impossible, pointing out that the imagery suggests "change and new life" rather than "loss and decay"; therefore "the task of the translator must […] be to determine and locate that seed and to set about its transplantation".[22] A translation, then, seen in terms of this metaphor, is a new shoot. It grows from the source in a different form, yet nonetheless it is a living, creative work in its own right.

Bassnett, and Derrida even more so, were inspired by the much earlier work of Walter Benjamin:

> We may call this connection [between the translation and the original] a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital connection. Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of

[21] Susan Bassnett, 'Transplanting the Seed: Poetry and Translation', *Constructing Cultures*, p. 57.
[22] *Constructing Cultures*, p. 58.

importance to it, a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life.

[…]

Contrary, therefore, to the claims of bad translators, such translations do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it.[23]

This line of thinking opens up the possibility of an original and its translation existing in parallel rather than in a hierarchy, two different texts but with equal artistic merit. Benjamin also argued that an original never actually reaches a point of final completion, but remains a living text since things external to the text change around it, altering the way in which it is perceived – translators should therefore be aware of this linguistic vitality and how it affects their role:

> The obvious tendency of a writer's literary style may in time wither away, only to give rise to immanent tendencies in the literary creation. What sounded fresh once may sound hackneyed later; what was once current may someday sound quaint.
>
> […]
>
> Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.[24]

---

[23] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 71.
[24] *Ibid*, p. 73.

Hans J. Vermeer, and his co-author Katharina Reiss, have also been highly influential in this reimagining of the translator's role, with the 'skopos' theory of translation.[25] *Skopos* means 'purpose', and the theory challenges the equivalence paradigm by focusing on the communicative purpose of each individual translation, a purpose that need not be the same for all translations. Indeed, the same text may be translated more than once with different purposes, leading to more than one target text, each equally valid.[26] Whilst the equivalence paradigm can allow for multiple valid translations of the same text rather than one unattainable ideal translation, as long as it is accepted that there is more than one potential analysis of the original, the focus nevertheless is always on the source text. The skopos theory allows for the idea that the translator's final loyalty lies not with the source text but with the target text, and the purpose it is meant to achieve. Anthony Pym has written that "Hans Vermeer saw his *Skopos* rule as effectively "dethroning" the source text. For him, the translator's decisions could no longer be based solely on what was in the source."[27]

It is furthermore worth considering whether there is in fact really such a great difference between the original author of a work of literature and its translator, or between the processes of creating an 'original' work and the process of translating. It has often been assumed that the original author is free, and therefore creative, whereas the translator is confined to following the source text, and therefore derivative. However, ideas of intertextuality such as those popularised by George Steiner in *After Babel* have blurred the definitions of the very concept of 'originality'. According to the

[25] Hans J. Vermeer, 'Skopos and Commission in Translational Action', trans. by Andrew Chesterman, *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. by Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2004)
[26] Anthony Pym, *Exploring Translation Theories* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 43-55.
[27] *Ibid*, p. 54.

arguments put forward in this book, all art and particularly literature is necessarily a form of translation. As Steiner writes, "no statement starts completely anew, no meaning comes from a void"[28] and "defined 'topologically', a culture is a sequence of translations and transformations of constants".[29] Art operates within a complex system of self-reference; to reuse Shelley's metaphor, seeds are taken from other works of art and transplanted and grown anew in different forms. As Loffredo and Perteghella phrased it:

> Texts do not occur out of nothing, but recur as altered forms of pre-existing texts – as intertexts; there are no origins and there is no closure, but an ongoing textual activity consisting of a host of complex transactions, in which texts are assimilated, borrowed and rewritten.[30]

In this sense, the composition of an original work of literature is not much different from the regenerative process of translation, as presented by Benjamin, Derrida and Bassnett. The relationship between creativity and constraint is also interesting in this context. Jeremy Munday has argued that far from being mutually exclusive, constraint is actually a necessary catalyst for creativity, "the creative voice does not [...] exist unbounded. It is countered or exaggerated by the concept of constraints – the greater the constraint, the greater the potential creativity demanded of the translator".[31] This applies equally to original authors and translators; all creativity is born out of some form of constraint.

---

[28] George Steiner, *After Babel, Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 485.
[29] *Ibid*, p. 449.
[30] *Translating and Creativity*, p. 4.
[31] Jeremy Munday, 'The Creative Voice of the Translator of Latin American Literature', *Romance Studies*, 27.4, (November 2009), p. 248.

It is not only the idea of an authoritative original as distinct from the process of translation which weakens on closer inspection. The very idea of perfect, unhindered transmission of ideas from the author to the reader is also problematic, no less for readers of originals than of translations. It is simply not true that those who are able to read a piece of literature in the original receive the unadulterated, pure message of the author in a way that readers of translations cannot. Reading in itself is a form of translation, on a personal level. Each and every member of a language community possesses a unique idiolect, a way of expressing themselves in that language which differs, be it ever so slightly, from any other member. A reader is therefore always linguistically separated from an author. Often there is a chronological, geographical or socio-political separation which will exacerbate this linguistic breach. However, even if there are no such obvious differences, no two people have precisely the same experiences with a language and so no two people will have the exact same set of associations and connotations available to them.

The act of reading is an interpretative act, in which the reader plays a significant role alongside the author; a reader is never a mere receptor for the author's message, but rather will always bring something to the text in the process of reading. Indeed, it is likely that the same reader will have a different reading experience approaching the same text at different points in his or her life. The words themselves will not have changed, but changes in the reader themselves will effectively have altered the text. Marcel Proust expressed this idea more elegantly than most when he wrote that, "in reality, every reader, as he reads, is the reader of himself. The work of the writer is only

a sort of optic instrument which he offers to the reader so that he may discern in the book what he would probably not have seen in himself."[32]

It is also extremely important to take into account when comparing an original text and its translation the fact that they exist in different cultural contexts. One example of failure to do so is that, to a certain extent, the idea that Laxness is a particularly difficult author to translate appears to be a self-propagating opinion, which is heard and repeated without a great deal of critical engagement. No text exists in a cultural vacuum, no language can be separated from culture, and really it should go without saying that any work of literature is inextricably tied to the culture of the language community in which it was created. Whilst we must certainly accept that extreme care is needed to successfully translate an author of such high calibre as Laxness, and that loss of specific cultural references is indeed one of the inevitable losses of translation, this is certainly not a phenomenon peculiar to Laxness. Certainly, at a solely linguistic level, the richness of Laxness' vocabulary makes him a challenging author for a translator. Even Gunnar Gunnarsson, the translator of *Salka Valka* into Danish and a native speaker of Icelandic, required Laxness to explain for him the dialectical vocabulary in that novel, which the author had "snapað upp sitt í hverri áttinni á fjörðunum".[33]

However, I would suggest that Laxness' revolutionary role in the history of Icelandic literature has slightly over-coloured his reputation as a supremely challenging author to translate. Halldór Guðmundsson wrote on the subject of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, Laxness' first novel:

---

[32] Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vol II, trans by C.K. Scott-Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), pp. 1180-1181.
[33] *Skáldatími*, p. 210.

> Icelandic prose writers of the time generally navigated the safe waters of tasteful dullness, practising a comfortable form of late naturalism. Laxness, on the other hand, amused himself by mixing his imagery, elevating the mundane to sublime levels and reducing the sublime to the ridiculous. In the process, he expanded the spectrum of the written language. The book saw the emergence of the authorial qualities which have characterized all his later works: never taking the obvious route when expressing something, if another way can be found; avoiding overused clichés; and viewing almost everything from a new angle.
>
> […]
>
> Icelandic prose could not remain unchanged by his works – nothing was beyond its capacity any longer, and its power of expression had been greatly enriched.

In a similar vein, Loftur Bjarnason noted that "Laxness has a way of saying things that is not necessarily Icelandic; it is so peculiarly Laxness that the Icelanders have a word for it – Kiljanesque or Kiljanska".[34]

However, it does not necessarily follow that a translation of his work into English need revolutionise English literary prose in the same way. English literature has a very different history from Icelandic literature, and *Independent People* emerged into quite a different literary environment than *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, or *Sjálfstætt fólk*. It is therefore somewhat problematic to assume that a translator should aspire to a target text which will have the same effect on the target audience as the source text had on its original audience; this would indeed be extremely difficult, nigh impossible, to achieve for any text. Many stylistic features, such as imagery, metaphor, and the early magical realism present in Laxness' works, are all readily translatable. However, that is not to

[34] Loftur Bjarnason, Review of *World Light*, pp. 216-217.

say that they will have the same effects in a different language, since they are operating in a different cultural and linguistic context.

Furthermore, it has been argued that the peculiarity of Laxness' Icelandic prose is in fact the direct result of his considerable reading and proficiency in other European languages. Stefán Einarsson has written of the imperative importance of these influences in understanding Laxness' style:

> [Laxness] has been thrown into the maelstrom of postwar Europe (notably Germany) with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as beacons on the shore, but Strindberg and Johannes Jörgensen at the tiller. For a while he reached a safe haven in a Catholic monastery in Luxembourg, whence he sent home surrealistic poetry and gathered material for the great autobiographical novel recording his mental development, "a witch-brew" of ideas presented in a stylistic furioso" (Peter Hallberg), *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (1927). I have long thought that this work was marked by the chaos of German Expressionism; at any rate it has the abandon advocated by André Breton, the master of French Surrealism.[35]

Translation itself often involves a 'creative stretching' of the target language; loan words, 'literal translations' and mirroring of stylistic features in the source language create a novel form of the target language, and can indeed permanently alter it.[36] Gauti Kristmannsson has explored the idea of translation without an original, whereby certain features of a foreign language or languages are imported into the language of an original

[35] Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York: The John Hopkins Press, 1957), p. 291.
[36] Michael Holman and Jean Boase-Beier, 'Introduction: Writing, Rewriting and Translation through Constraint to Creativity', *The Practices of Literary Translation: Constraints and Creativity*, ed. by Jean Boase-Beier and Michael Holman (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1998), pp. 15-17.

piece of writing. Specifically he mentions Horace, who used Greek poetic forms for his own poetry:

> Horace explains his route to originality. Here he attacks imitators (*imitatores*) […] before proudly claiming "I was the first to plant free footsteps on a virgin soil; I walked not where others trod". Again the (relatively) modern translation gives an impression of colonial annexation, as does the original, which in this case is not to be understood metaphorically, but indeed as an annexation of the Greek, not through the appropriation of content this time, but of form. This is the method by which the *translatio* finally succeeds in translating while removing all notions of translating, what I refer to as a translation without an original.[37]

Although I would not attach any imperialistic undertones to Laxness' use of inspirations and influences outside of Iceland, it is indeed interesting to note that form and style can be 'translated' without any actual interlingual translation taking place.

Therefore, although there is plenty in Laxness' works that is unique to Iceland, the assertion that he is as an author so peculiarly Icelandic as to be a particular challenge for translators is perhaps somewhat backwards. It might be more accurate to say that he is so peculiarly un-Icelandic that in fact his style may seem more familiar to speakers of other European languages than to speakers of Icelandic. In light of this, it is interesting to consider briefly Laxness' own technique as a translator, in which he 'creatively stretched' Icelandic a great deal, not to everyone's liking. Hannibal Valdimarsson, who reviewed his translation of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, complained that "á hverri blaðsíðu er íslenzku máli svo freklega misboðið, að hreinasta ómenning verður að

[37] Gauti Kristmannsson, *Literary Diplomacy I: The Role of Translation in the Construction of National Literatures in Britain and Germany 1750-1830* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 40-41.

teljast”.[38] Shadows of these tendencies can be found in his original writing, in which the Icelandic language is itself and yet expanded, undeniably coloured by the other languages and cultures that Laxness knew.

---

[38] Hannibal Valdimarsson, ‘Málleysur og ómenning á ábyrgð og kostnað “Máls og Menningar”’, *Skutull*, 19.34 (September 1941), p. 132

CHAPTER 4

WEATHER VOCABULARY AND CREATIVITY

In these next sections of the thesis, I will turn my attention to Thompson's use of language in *Independent People*, how it compares to the use of language in *Sjálfstætt fólk* and evidence of creativity in the translation process. I would suggest, to begin with, that the conditions under which Thompson was working were conducive to creativity. The status of the author clearly has the potential to affect the extent to which their work is viewed as 'sacred', and therefore the pressure on the translator in terms of the impossible expectations discussed in the second chapter. The task of translating Shakespeare, for example, is not comparable to the task of translating a little-known author's first novel, regardless of that novel's literary merit. It is therefore relevant to consider the environment in which J.A. Thompson was working in relation to the author figure of Halldór Laxness at that time.

A translator tackling a Laxness novel nowadays would, I argue, be facing a far more psychologically daunting task than Thompson. Laxness' own autobiographical writing makes clear that when *Sjálfstætt fólk* was published, he was a writer of little standing even in Iceland, not to speak of his reputation abroad. At any rate, he experienced difficulties finding publishers for his work:

> Núverandi formaður þess ríkisforlags, H. Sæmundsson, skýrði nýlega frá því í útvarpsræðu að Salka Valka hefði verið gefin út í gustukaskyni af þessu forlagi þegar útséð var um að einginn einkaforleggari á Íslandi vildi prenta bókina.
>
> [...]

> Næstu bók, Sjálfstætt fólk, þorði einginn forleggjari á Íslandi að gefa út heldur, af því menn vissu ekki hvað mundi vera sagt í Danmörku.[39]

However, since 1955 Laxness has been a 'Nobel Prize winning author', a label that carries the implication of great literature. In Iceland he is a writer of incredible weight and importance, an author of 'classics'. His works are firm staples of the literary canon, the sort of books that children study at school and of which everybody is expected to have a certain degree of knowledge, even if they have not read them themselves. For example, one would be hard pressed to find an Icelander who had not heard of Bjartur í Sumarhúsum. Although Laxness' reputation has not reached such lofty heights outside of Iceland, any current translator of his will undoubtedly be aware of his towering status in his home country. Thompson was not subject to this potentially stifling level of pressure, and we might therefore be unsurprised that despite his reported painstaking labours to preserve all the nuances of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, which might suggest the classic figure of the 'faithful translator', *Independent People* is in many ways a highly creative and original translation.

It is no overstatement to say that creativity is in fact a necessary part of the translation process, if the translated text is to emerge as a successful work of literature. Since loss is, as has been mentioned previously, unavoidable, it follows that the only way to deal with this is to ensure that the translator puts something back. The term 'compensation' has been used to describe a strategy the translator might use when faced with 'untranslatability'. Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet described it as a "procedure whereby the tenor of the whole piece is maintained by playing, in a stylistic detour, the note that could not be played in the same way and in the same place as in the

[39] *Skáldatími*, pp. 207-208.

source".[40] A commonly given example of a situation in which compensation strategy might be employed is that of translation from a language that has a T-V distinction (separate informal and formal, or honorific, second-person pronouns) into one that does not. Whether the formal or informal terms of address are used by characters in the source text gives the reader implicit information about these characters and the relationship between them; respect, intimacy, rudeness, seniority and so forth can all be indicated by this grammatical distinction. It is then impossible to reproduce that information in the same way in the target text. A translator might 'compensate' for this by adding something to the target text that gives a similar impression, perhaps suggesting formality by the addition of a title, for example Mr, or by using a character's surname rather than first name. By this means, so the idea goes, essential information can be preserved, albeit transmitted in a different way. This strategy is unambiguously creative; the translator is adding something original which did not directly come from the source text. However, I would also argue that the definition of compensation could usefully be significantly broadened to include original content that makes up, in a more indirect fashion, for the phenomenon of translational loss. There is much in *Independent People* that comes from J.A. Thompson rather than Laxness, and which directly contributes to the success of the novel as a work of English-language literature.

One of the inevitable losses incurred by translation that calls for some form of compensation is that for unusual or precise words in the source text, there will often not be a word with a similar meaning available in the target language. This is unavoidable, for example, when the source language has a larger vocabulary in one particular

[40] Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, quoted in *Exploring Translation Theories*, p. 15.

semantic field than the target language. The translator is then left with little choice but to translate many different words with the same target language word. Without creative efforts to compensate for this, the richness of the source text vocabulary would be reduced and the target text may become repetitive. When one word in the target language covers the same lexical ground of many words in the source language, there may also take place a kind of lexical levelling; meaning may become more generic and specifics are lost. Indeed, a later and more prolific translator of Laxness, Magnus Magnusson claimed that the greatest challenge he faced was that "í mörgum tilvikum finnist ekki jafn mörg orð yfir sama fyrirbæri og notuð séu í almennu íslensku máli. Hvað þá í því mikla safni orða sem Halldór hafi á takteinum".[41]

In the case of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, vocabulary relating to snow and weather in general sprang to mind as an interesting focus for an investigation into this phenomenon in Thompson's translation. Whichever way you look at it and without wishing to venture into the subject of linguistic relativity, there exist a far greater variety of words within this semantic field in Icelandic than in English, and *Sjálfstætt fólk* is a novel with frequent descriptions of weather. For this section of the dissertation, then, I looked more closely at the chapters 'Eftirleit' and 'Rímnakvæði' ('Search' and 'Ballad Poetry'), which deal with the protagonist Bjartur's search for a lost sheep and ordeals in a snow storm (although I also looked at weather descriptions in other parts of the novel). One of the most noticeable features of the translation is that the English word 'snow' is used to translate more than one Icelandic word:

[41] *Til fundar við skáldið Halldór Laxness*, p. 171.

IS … gekk hann yfir slóð nokkurra hreindýra í **mjöllinni** [p. 135][42]

EN … he crossed the spoor of a number of reindeer in **the snow** [p. 86][43]

IS … **hríðina** syrti meir og meir … [p. 137]

EN … **the snow** growing heavier and heavier … [p. 88]

IS … rofaði í bakkann gegnum **kófið** við og við… [p. 142]

EN … the banks […] showed intermittently through **the snow**… [p. 90]

IS … féll **snjórinn** í þúngum flyksum til jarðar … [p. 138]

EN … **the snow** fell to the earth in heavy flakes … [p. 88]

IS … að grafa sig í **fönn** … [p. 145]

EN … to bury himself in **the snow** … [p. 92]

The word 'snow' is, by necessity, used more frequently by Thompson than any word used by Laxness. Interestingly, though, Thompson is not consistent. He does not always translate these words in the same way, sometimes using English words that are more descriptive or specific than 'snow':

IS … og samt stóð **hríðin** í fang honum ... [p. 146]

EN … but still **the blizzard** assailed him … [p. 94]

---

[42] Halldór Laxness, *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1987).

[43] Halldór Laxness, *Independent People*, trans. by J.A. Thompson (New York: Vintage, 1997).

IS Ekki hafði hírst þannig allleingi í **fönninni** … [p. 148]

EN He had not rested long in **the snowdrift** … [p. 94]

These are just a couple of examples; there are many more and overall Thompson appears very flexible in his choice of translations. The logical outcome of following a strategy of formal equivalence, and to a certain extent dynamic equivalence as well, is that a word used several times in the source text, providing it has the same meaning in each instance, should be translated consistently using the same target language word or words every time. The patterns of word choices made by the original author would thereby be preserved, and one might expect the target text to thereby mirror both form and meaning in the source text. Certainly, inconsistency of this kind can be problematic in literary translation (and of course also in other sorts of translation). If the author has selected the same word in two or more different instances in order to achieve a specific literary effect, for example to explicitly link different sections of the text, then inconsistent translation is simply a failure on the part of the translator to thoroughly read and correctly interpret the source text. A translator must have the whole text in mind whilst translating rather than simply focusing on one small section.

However, this principle can easily be followed too rigidly. For one thing, as mentioned above, such a strategy could lead to repetition in the case of translating Icelandic weather vocabulary into English, where there is no such repetition in the source text. In the case of these specific examples, it is also not inaccurate to translate *fönn* as either ‘snowdrift’ or ‘snow’, or *hríð* as either ‘blizzard’ or ‘snow’, depending on the context. When more descriptive terms are appropriate, their usage can evidently

create a richer and more vivid translation. Furthermore, although patterns in an original author's vocabulary can be important, in many cases presumably the author chose the word based on meaning and literary effect at the sentence or paragraph level. In which case, the translator should be afforded the same freedoms, subject to a careful reading of the source text.

Beyond this flexibility, Thompson employs a variety of creative tactics in translating this vocabulary. In many cases, the result is a target text that is longer than the source text, where Thompson has translated one Icelandic word with multiple English words. Most commonly a simple noun becomes a noun phrase, or is otherwise augmented with an adjective or adverb which provides the information that could not be relayed with a simple noun in the target language:

IS Fljótið valt fram straumþungt og myrkt í **kafaldsmuggunni**… [p. 138]

EN The river thundered past, dark and heavy in **the drizzling snow**… [p. 88]

Evidently, to have translated *kafaldsmuggunni* as 'the snow' would have been to miss the finer points of the word's definition. The present participle 'drizzling' provides additional information about the quality of the snow. English is indeed not less expressive than Icelandic when it comes to this semantic field; rather, instead of a myriad of different nouns, English tends to use other word classes to qualify a more limited selection of nouns. In this case, the image presented to the reader of the Icelandic text, using a single noun, and the reader of the English text, using a noun

phrase, is very similar. Changes to the grammatical structure of the source text are often more radical than this, though:

IS Veður var **frostlítið** en korgað loft, og **fór með dymbíngskafald** þegar á leið daginn. [p. 137]

EN There was **not much frost**, but the sky was overcast, and as day wore on, **it began to snow quite heavily**. [p. 88]

In this extract, the adjective *frostlítið*, qualifying the noun *veður*, becomes a noun phrase 'not much frost', accompanied by a dummy subject. The Icelandic noun *dymbíngskafald* likewise becomes an English verb qualified by an adverb. The surface structure of the source text has been fundamentally altered in the process of translation. However, once again the actual image presented to the reader is very similar in both texts. So far, the examples discussed fall well within the scope of strategies based on dynamic, or functional, equivalence. Thompson's changes in these instances were arguably necessitated by differences between the source language and target language structures. In short, Thompson and Laxness are saying the same thing in a slightly different way. However, there are also many examples that do not fit easily into this model, in which Thompson genuinely has introduced something original. For example:

IS Á þetta sinn voru snjóar enn léttir, en **skrof í flögum**. [p. 135]

EN On this occasion there was still very little snow, but **where the ground was bare of turf it was covered with little flat cakes of ice**. [p. 86]

The phrase *skrof í flögum* evidently requires a descriptive translation of the same ilk as those discussed above, 'little flat cakes of ice'. The word *en*, however, is in this instance quite a challenge for the English translator. Laxness here employs a highly literary construction, arguably more typical of poetry than prose; *en skrof í flögum* is not a grammatically complete clause, the verb *að vera* (and the dummy subject *það*) is implied but absent and the meaning must be constructed by the reader, just the same as *en korgað loft* in the extract quoted above. The omission of the verb *to be* in elliptical clauses is a device often seen in English literature; however, it is doubtful whether this particular construction could be made to work in English. For both *en korgað loft* and *en skrof í flögum*, Thompson must therefore use a grammatically complete clause in his translation. The information contained in the source text is accurately relayed, but the register is altered. That the 'little flat cakes of ice' appear specifically 'where the ground [is] bare of turf', though, is wholly new information not directly provided by the source text, although it could perhaps be inferred. To return to the idea of translation as 'transplanting the seed', we might imagine that at this point Thompson has envisioned the scene presented in the source text and taken that image as his seed. The English translation is then a description of that image in Thompson's own words, which happen to be more detailed. The end result is a sentence which lacks the authorial style of the original, but which is more descriptive in its imagery. Whatever the process, it is undeniable that what the reader of the English text here receives is an image from the imagination of Thompson, rather than directly from Laxness.

There are many more examples of creativity and originality to be found in *Independent People*:

IS …**mylgríngur** dag eftir dag, annars ekki neitt, ekki spor í **snjónum**, **lognsnjór**, hið óskráðasta og sagnafæsta af öllu sem hnígur úr loftinu, maður horfir útí **drífuna** í blindni…

EN …**thick snow falling quietly, gently, but persistently,** day after day; otherwise nothing, not a footprint to be seen. **Calm-weather snow** is the most incommunicative of all things that fall from the skies; one looked blindly out at **the drift of it**…

In this extract one word, *mylgríngur*, becomes a seven-word noun phrase including an adjective, a present participle and three adverbs. 'Snow' indeed would hardly cover the meaning of *mylgríngur*, which is defined as 'smágert fjúk' in *Íslensk orðabók*.[44] In turn, *fjúk* can mean 'snjókoma', 'skafrenningur' or 'lítil snjódrífa með hægum vindi'. It is debatable, then, whether 'thick snow' is the best choice in terms of semantics, since the definitions seem to rather indicate light snow, although 'quietly, gently' reinforces the qualities suggested by *mylgríngur*.

However, 'thick' can also be interpreted in light of the stylistic effect of this section as a whole. Laxness' sentence is longer and continues where Thompson inserts a full stop and begins a new sentence, including 'is', the verb 'to be', which is not present in the source text. Laxness' sentence is made up of listing, short, grammatically fragmentary phrases separated by commas, a common literary device. The rhythmic effect of this listing mimics the relentless falling snow, as does the repetition in *í snjónum, lognsnjór*. With this in mind, the word 'thick' can perhaps be better

[44] *Íslensk orðabók*, 4th edn., ed. by Mörður Árnason (Reykjavík: Edda, 2007).

understood, since it emphasises this all-pervading quality, and indeed there is 'nothing' but the snow; this is evident in both the source and target texts. It also accounts for the particularly long translation of *mylgringur*. With 'thick snow falling quietly, gently, but persistently', Thompson essentially introduces his own listing, thereby ensuring the effect is not lost with the splitting of the sentence.

Finally, *drífuna* becomes 'the drift of it'. This is a creative use of a cognate on the part of Thompson. The most obvious explanation for the translation is the desire to avoid repetition of the word 'snow' (or words containing 'snow', for example 'snowfall'). 'Drift' does indeed exist in the English language as a word for 'snowdrift'. However, here Laxness is referring to falling snow rather than what in English would be called a drift. Therefore in this case we might consider *drífa* to be a 'false friend', a source language cognate of a word existing in the target language which nevertheless has a different meaning. Thompson here has rather embraced the 'false friend', but in adding 'of it' (i.e. of the snow), the image is not of a snowdrift but of drifting, falling snow, which captures the sense of *drífa* in the source text. It is also interesting to note that although Thompson occasionally uses phrasing of a less literary register than Laxness, as in the example of *en skrof í flögum* discussed above, in this case 'the drift of it' is actually of a more literary or poetic register than *drífuna*. One might conceivably think of this, and other examples like it, as a sort of indirect stylistic compensation. If in some places Thompson is forced to be more literal, by producing more poetic English in other places the literary register of the work as a whole is preserved.

Besides 'the drift of it', Thompson comes up with a number of highly creative ways to express the different images of snow presented by Laxness:

IS **Snjófallið** varð biturra og smágervara eftir því sem frostið óx, **vaxandi skafbylur neðan**… [p. 145]

EN **The snow-flakes** grew smaller and keener; **no sooner had they fallen than the wind lifted them again and chased them along the ground in a spuming, knee-deep smother**. [pp. 92-93]

Thompson here is compelled to describe something for which there is no specific word in the English language. Just as in the translation of *en skrof í flögum* discussed above, here Thompson seems to work from the image presented in the source text rather than the actual words or sentence structure. The clause *eftir því sem frostið óx* is left untranslated, as is *vaxandi*, but the English-speaking reader is nevertheless given more information in other parts of the sentence. The word *skafbylur* is defined by *Íslensk orðabók* as 'mikill vindur með skafrenningi'. The English language lacks a word for airborne snow that is whipped up by the wind as opposed to snow that is falling from the sky, although many English speakers are familiar with the phenomenon and can readily call the image to mind, clearly evoked, though in many more words, by 'no sooner had [the snowflakes] fallen than the wind lifted them again and chased them along the ground in a spuming, knee-deep smother'. In using his own original descriptive prose, Thompson here introduces many elements into his translation that were not present in the source text. 'The wind' here is personified as a conscious agent, 'lifting' and 'chasing' the snowflakes. This is a device that is, in a wider sense, in

keeping with Laxness' presentation of the storm itself as not merely a natural phenomenon, but Bjartur's sentient adversary, taking on the form of a demon in the protagonist's imagination. 'Knee-deep' is directly from *neðan*, yet 'spuming' and 'smother' are more obviously original, as it were. Perhaps Thompson's decision to use these words could be interpreted as another instance of indirect compensation, in that the literal snow vocabulary available to Thompson is more mundane and generic, and less descriptive, and so in choosing the unusual, evocative and poetic 'spuming' and 'smother' he maintains the lexical richness and variety of the work as a whole.

IS Ein spor eru ekki leingi að týnast í **snjónum**, í **hríðum** stysta dags, leingstu nætur; þau eru týnd um leið og þau eru stigin. Og enn einusinni **liggur fönn yfir heiðinni**. [p. 457]

EN One boy's footprints are not long in being lost in **the snow**, in **the steadily falling snow** of the shortest day, the longest night; they are lost as soon as they are made. And once again **the heath is clothed in drifting white**. [p. 297]

The most striking alteration in this extract is that, in phrasing that somewhat echoes 'the drift of it', *fönn* becomes *drifting white*, a descriptive metaphor that is actually a far more unusual use of the English language than *fönn* is of the Icelandic language. It is a dynamic image that suggests snow in the context, rather than a simple noun denoting snow; it is also more descriptive, a picture of colour and movement rather than simply a thing. Similarly, 'spuming, knee-deep smother' suggests rather than denotes (although in this case 'snowflakes' are the main subject of the sentence). At this

point it is interesting to remember the points made in the second chapter of this dissertation about the relationship between constraint and creativity. Thompson, with the limited snow vocabulary on offer in English, is almost forced to seek more creative solutions for describing snow than Laxness with his ready wealth of Icelandic nouns.

The translation of *snjónum* is as simple as possible, 'the snow'. However, *hríðum* here becomes 'steadily falling snow'. 'Steadily falling' does not come directly from meaning of the word *hríð*, which was probably chosen by Laxness in order to avoid repetition. Thompson likewise avoids simply repeating the word 'snow', but lacking an appropriate English synonym chooses a different tactic. 'Steadily falling snow' is a far gentler image than *hríð*, which implies rather a snowstorm or a blizzard with high winds. There is more 'intensity', as it were, in the word *hríð* than comes across in the English translation. The alliteration, repetition and rhythm from 'in the snow, in the steadily falling snow', lends strength to an image of gentle persistence, soft yet impossible to withstand. In this way, Thompson plays into the melancholy of the scene. This section of the novel refers to Bjartur's eldest son Helgi being lost and dying out in the snow, an event which is strongly implied to be essentially the boy's suicide. As his footprints are lost, so is he, the snow effacing both; it is not a violent death but rather a fading away of life, something which is reflected in the form of the English text. Thompson's metaphor of the snow 'clothing' the heath, which is not present in the Icelandic, further highlights this image of the snow covering up, almost suffocating everything else.

As can be seen from this analysis, this part of *Independent People* does not work in quite the same way as the corresponding part of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, and will not have precisely the same effect on a reader (although I have rather focused on the differences; there are of course many similarities also to be found). However, to say that here *Sjálfstætt fólk* is ‘better’ than *Independent People* would be an entirely subjective statement; the fact that *Sjálfstætt fólk* is the original is not support in itself for such an assertion. According to the traditional ideals of translation, Thompson has here failed on many counts, introducing both meaning and stylistic devices that were not to be found in the source text and also failing to transmit some that were. However, it is evident that Thompson’s English translation functions as a powerful and effective piece of literature in its own right, therefore it cannot be said to be a ‘poorer’ text simply because of the differences between it and the source text. There is a clear indication here of a conscious link between meaning and literary form, which is a mark of original and creative authorship on the part of Thompson.

CHAPTER 5

CREATIVITY AND CULTURE IN TRANSLATION

The previous chapter constituted an examination of creative solutions to the translation problem of restricted target language vocabulary. This chapter will turn to the problem of 'untranslatable' cultural elements in the source text, and also explore how the process of translation is a powerful force for creativity within the target language, encouraging the transfer of certain elements from the source language, thereby 'stretching' the target language.

Although Laxness' style may not be so foreign to non-Icelanders as some critics suspect, as discussed earlier, there is yet much in *Sjálfstætt fólk* that is particular to Iceland, in terms of cultural and literary references. It is interesting to look at how Thompson deals with these in his translation. Often in fact he does nothing to help the English-speaking reader pick up on or understand references that would have been familiar to the Icelandic-speaking reader of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, and sometimes this leads to clear cases of translational loss. This snippet of dialogue from the protagonist Bjartur is a good example of a cultural reference, and literary effect, that was simply untranslatable:

IS Ég hef mist mikið fé, sagði hann. Það er einsog þar stendur, deyr fé. [p. 461]

EN "I have lost many sheep," he went on. "It is as Odin said: Sheep die." [p. 300]

The phrase *deyr fé* that Bjartur quotes here is from a well-known section of the *Hávamál*, a collection of short proverb-like verses presented as advice from the god Óðinn, or Odin as he is generally known in English. The reader of the Icelandic original will surely not need to be told where *þar stendur* refers to, and it is this knowledge that the effect of the sentence hinges upon. The irony of Bjartur's statement to a large extent relies upon implicit knowledge of the rest of the two verses which start with *deyr fé*:

Deyr fé,
deyja frændur,
deyr sjálfur ið sama.
En orðstír
deyr aldregi
hveim er sér góðan getur.

Deyr fé,
deyja frændur,
deyr sjálfur ið sama.
Ég veit einn,
að aldrei deyr:
dómur um dauðan hvern.[45]

Evidently, Bjartur has somewhat, perhaps deliberately, missed the point of these two stanzas, focusing solely on the line that refers to livestock. In the English

[45] *Hávamál með skýringum*, ed. by Eyvindur P. Eiríksson (Reykjavík: Ásatrúarfélagið, 2007), pp. 62-63.

translation, Thompson replaces *einsog þar stendur* with ‘as Odin said’, which helps to maintain the effect to a certain extent; the absurdity of a deity talking about the death of sheep remains, and the English-speaking reader may infer that Bjartur is probably taking the words a little more literally than they were intended. However, the joke is largely lost. The only practical way to convey the significance of *deyr fé* to a reader with no knowledge of the *Hávamál* is with an explanatory note. While such a solution might be tempting for the translator who is eager to share the joke, there is hardly a surer way to break the contract of suspended disbelief that exists between a reader and a fictional text.

Another example of cultural information implicit in the source text that is lost in the process of translation is this extract, in which Bjartur’s mother-in-law, the grandmother of his sons, quotes from a well-known Icelandic folktale about the cow Búkolla:

IS Gamla konan tók prjóna sína ofanaf hillunni, og sagði um leið upphátt innanúr miðri sögu:

Baulaðu nú, baulaðu nú, Búkolla mín, ef þú ert nokkursstaðar á lífi.

Ha? sagði Bjartur önuglega af rúmi sínu.

Taktu hár úr hala mínum og legðu það á jörðina, tautaðu gamla konan niðrí prjónana án útskýringar. [p. 259]

EN The old woman took her needles down from the shelf, and from the middle of her story spoke these words aloud:

“Moo now, moo now, my Bukolla, if you are alive at all.”

"Eh?" demanded Bjartur crossly from his bed.

"Pluck a hair from my tail and lay it on the ground," mumbled the old woman into her knitting without explanation. [p. 167]

It may be safely assumed that the vast majority of Icelandic readers of *Sjálfstætt fólk* will know the story of Búkolla and the specific phrasing, just as anyone brought up in an English-speaking country will immediately recognise, "Grandmother, what big eyes you have", "All the better to see you with", as part of the story of Little Red Riding Hood. These are words from childhood, known by heart seemingly without ever having been learnt. For the reader of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, then, the old woman's words need no explanation; although the narrative is disjointed the gaps can easily be filled. The story is significant in its connection to events in the plot; it comes directly after the Bailiff's offer to provide Bjartur with a cow, and directly before the arrival of the cow (named Búkolla). Due to the importance of Búkolla to the family in the story, and her magical powers, Hallbera's muttering of this particular folktale foreshadows the importance of the cow of the same name to the people at Summerhouses. The English-speaking reader of *Independent People* is excluded from that instant recognition, and therefore something is certainly lost. He or she is told that this is a story and the verb 'moo' indicates that it is about a cow, but the full significance of the reference cannot be preserved.

Sometimes, however, although the reference is lost, what remains is still a powerful literary image, as in this section in which Bjartur's family finds a dandelion in bloom:

IS Öll systkinin og móðir þeirra fóru útundir bæarvegg til þess að skoða þennan litla fífil, sem breiddi krónu sína svo sæll og djarfur móti vetrarsólinni, þessa úngu viðkvæmu krónu. **Eitt eilífðar smáblóm**. [p. 380]

EN The children and their mother went round to inspect the little dandelion, which spread its petals so bravely and so happily in the winter sun, those tender young petals. **One small eternal flower**. [p. 245]

For anybody familiar with Matthías Jochumsson's 'Lofsöngur', the lyrics to the Icelandic national anthem, the words *eitt eilífðar smáblóm* are instantly recognisable as a direct quotation, lending them a significance that they necessarily cannot retain in the English translation. It is unlikely (although of course not impossible) that an English-speaking reader of *Independent People* would be sufficiently au fait with Icelandic culture to pick up on this fact (although if he or she were, Thompson's translation is literal enough for the reference to be identified).

However, even for the reader who does not realise the source of the phrase, thereby missing the connection to Icelandic Romanticism and nationalism, the image in itself continues to function within the literary text. A single delicate flower, brave and happy in the winter sun, a herald of spring – the obvious metaphor is one of renewed hope, fragile and yet eternal, winter and hardship always come to an end and hope will always return. This interpretation is not in any way reliant upon a knowledge of the text being referenced, as the joke with *deyr fé* was. The monolingual reader of *Independent*

People faces no difficulty in understanding the image which finds new life, as it were, in the English language. This is a prime example of the way in which translation can lead to an enrichment of the target language and literary culture.

In the case of certain purely Icelandic cultural details, however, Thompson does offer an explanation to the reader, inserted into the text:

IS … já þrettándinn, hvað svo?

Þá fer að líða að **þorra**.

[…]

En Ásta Sóllilja hafði verið að vonast eftir öskudeginum, því hana minti að hann væri leiti þaðansem sæist til páska, en það var hvorki meira né minna en **þorrinn** og **góan** sem komu fyrst … [p. 471]

EN "Yes, Twelfth Night, and what then?"

"Then it will be getting on towards **Thorri**."

[…]

But Asta Sollilja had been hoping for Ash Wednesday, as she seemed to remember that Ash Wednesday was a summit from which Easter might be descried, but now it appeared that there was **all the month of Thorri** and **all the month of Goa** to fill in first … [pp. 306 – 307]

The words 'Thorri' and 'Goa' are certainly not part of the English language, so they are bound to have a very different effect in an English text than in an Icelandic one. Although Thompson has altered the orthography ('þ' becomes 'th', 'ó' becomes 'o' and

both words are capitalised in accordance with how the names of months are generally written in English), they are nevertheless still foreign words and the monolingual reader has little chance of guessing what they might refer to. Thompson, however, finds a creative solution to this in using the repeated phrase ‘all the month of’ as a translation of *það var hvorki meira né minna*, thereby giving both the sense of an interminable length of waiting yet to come and the information that ‘Thorri’ and ‘Goa’ are months.

IS Hét þeirra fyrirliði **Kólumkilli** hinn írski, særíngamaður mikill. [p. 7]

EN Their leader was **Kolumkilli** the Irish, a sorcerer of wide repute. [p. 5]

This extract is interesting for the fact that Thompson does not use the standard English form for Kólumkilli, preferring to retain the Icelandic version of the name (though adapted to English orthography, as the other Icelandic names in the novel are). In Icelandic, the historical figure may be referred to as either Kólumkilli, from the Irish *Colm Cille*, or Kólumba, from the Latin form. In English, the only form used is the Latin, yet Thompson does not write ‘Columba the Irish’, or even ‘Colm Cille the Irish’. The name is therefore no longer recognisable as the historical figure. In this instance the name seems almost to be a loan word, although it is usually not possible to class proper names as loan words. A possible explanation for this decision is the fact that Columba is too well known as a saint, so that the name may be distracting considering his fictional incarnation within the novel. ‘Kolumkilli the Irish’ is more fitting than Columba as the name of a “sorcerer”, “fiend”, and a spirit that haunts the cursed land of Summerhouses. On the other hand, the irony of interpreting a saint as a sorcerer and a fiend may well have been deliberate on the part of Laxness. Either way, the words ‘Kolumkilli’,

‘Thorri’ and ‘Goa’ all have a clear foreignising effect in *Independent People*. It is perhaps not the politicised foreignising advocated by Venuti, but these unfamiliar names serve to remind the reader that this is in origin a foreign text, set in a foreign land and culture. Loan words are always a creative feature of translation, in that they expand the vocabulary of the target language, whether simply within one particular translated text or whether they enter the language in more general usage.

Loan words, however, are just one example of how the English of *Independent People* is expanded and altered by the process of translation. Besides the usage of untranslated Icelandic words, there is much in *Independent People* that indicates a particular variety of English influenced by the Icelandic language. I have already looked at the idea of Laxness’ own prose being influenced by his familiarity with the languages and literature of other European countries. It was suggested that this observation goes some way to offering an explanation for his role in revolutionising Icelandic literary prose, creating “a new style, alternately lyrical and rationalistic, sympathetic and cynical, full of storms and stresses, that contrasted vividly with the classic puristic style of his predecessors and contemporaries”.[46] I would argue that Thompson’s familiarity with the Icelandic language likewise affected his English prose in translating *Sjálfstætt fólk*. By this I do not mean that Thompson’s prose has the awkwardness or ungrammaticality of ‘translatese’, a pejorative term that has been used to refer to translated text that is unidiomatic as a result of translating ‘literally’. Nor do I believe that *Independent People* complies to the ideals of Venuti and others who advocate translations that are obviously translations, favouring the surface structure of the source language in order to bring readers out of their comfort zones. As can be seen from the

[46] *A History of Icelandic Literature*, p. 319.

previous chapter, Thompson had no qualms about writing certain sections of *Independent People* in what is unambiguously his own original English prose, which is inspired by the Icelandic source text, but could not be said to be wholly derived from it. He certainly does not favour Icelandic syntax. However, neither could it be said that the English of *Independent People* is bland or generic; Thompson has not sacrificed the character of the work for the comfort of 'fluency', though this character differs from that of *Sjálfstætt fólk*. There is plenty in *Independent People* that stands out as unusual (not exactly disfluent, but far from the 'obvious' choices) for the English-speaking reader.

For instance, one noticeable feature of Thompson's vocabulary is that it is scattered with unusual, archaic and dialectical words. Here, it could be said, is the other side to the 'restricted vocabulary' coin. If we accept that there are semantic fields in which the source language has a more extensive vocabulary, it follows that there must also be semantic fields in which the opposite is true. If Thompson was at times faced with a more limited choice than Laxness had been, and was compelled to translate specific Icelandic vocabulary with more generic English terms, or to find some longer way to express it, at other points in the text he will have had more choices than Laxness. There are a number of examples in *Independent People* where Thompson chose to translate a common Icelandic word with a more unusual English one, sometimes highly unusual. Interestingly, he uses many English words which are obvious cognates of Icelandic words, which has an intriguing effect on *Independent People* as a piece of literature:

IS … því **heiðavötnin** eru lögð… [p. 135]

EN … for **the moorland tarns** are frozen over… [p. 86]

IS … gekk hann yfir **slóð** nokkurra hreindýra… [p. 135]

EN … he crossed the **spoor** of a number of reindeer… [p. 86]

IS … er síðar stóð **bærinn** Albogastaðir í Heiði [p. 7]

EN … where later stood **the bigging** Albogastathir on the Moor [p. 5]

IS Það var einhver að segja að þú værir að hugsa um að **flytja** þig þángað og selja hér [p. 593]

EN "I hear you're thinking of selling this place and **flitting** away there" [p. 388]

These words are cognates of the Icelandic *tjörn*, *spor*, *bygging* and *flytja*. They are also words that jump out at the English reader, to a greater or lesser extent, as non-standard, dialectical or archaic, whereas the corresponding words used in the Icelandic source text are fairly standard vocabulary. Aside from *flytja* and 'flit', these examples are also not translations of their actual cognates, suggesting that Thompson was influenced in these choices not directly from the Icelandic of the source text but from his familiarity with the language in general. None of them are the obvious translations. Whilst 'tarn', for example, meaning specifically a mountain lake or pool, and 'moorland tarn' even more so, pretty well captures the denotation of *heiðavatn*, 'tarns' has an effect that *heiðavötn* does not. The standard modern word in English would probably be

‘lake’, a more general term like *vatn*, so the expected translation might have been ‘moorland lakes’. ‘Spoor’ also is a very particular word, usually used, as here, to mean the tracks of an animal, often quarry. This is far more specific than ‘tracks’, or *slóð*. ‘Flit’ (in this sense) and ‘bigging’ are both highly unusual, surviving only in regional dialects if not essentially obsolete, certainly not standard words like *bær* (or indeed *bygging*) and *flytja*, which we might expect to see translated as ‘farm’ and ‘move’. In some ways, the choice of cognates such as ‘bigging’ and ‘flit’ might seem like a subtle form of foreignisation, in that it embodies an attempt to move the target language close to the source language as it were. However, the effect is more complex than that, since they do not exactly strike the English-speaking reader as foreign, being as they are genuine words within the language.

In a subtle manner, they emphasise the historical links between Icelandic and English. Although these words are not necessarily those that entered English directly from Old Norse, nevertheless the affinity and shared roots between Icelandic and modern English is clear. Seamus Heaney has written of the power of etymological links between languages in the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, which contains many archaic cognates from Old English and tends explicitly towards the Anglo-Saxon and Norse elements in the English language rather than the French and Latinate (although he also draws on Irish dialectical words). He describes how he felt on discovering an Irish word that was still used in his English-speaking family’s dialect, “in the resulting etymological eddy a gleam of recognition flashed through the synapses and I glimpsed an elsewhere of potential which seemed at the same time to be a

somewhere being remembered."[47] This was later repeated with the Old English word *þolian*:

> "They'll just have to learn to thole," my aunt would say about some family who had suffered an unforeseen bereavement. And now suddenly here was "thole" in the official textual world, mediated through the apparatus of a scholarly edition, a little bleeper to remind me that my aunt's language was not just a self-enclosed family possession but an historical heritage, one that involved the journey *þolian* had made […] When I read in John Crowe Ransom the line "Sweet ladies, long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole," my heart lifted again, the world widened, something was furthered […] What I was experiencing as I kept meeting up with *thole* on its multicultural odyssey was the feeling which Osip Mandelstam once defined as a "nostalgia for world culture."[48]

This is surely a familiar sensation to many who have studied languages and discovered these etymological relationships, and there are a myriad of such connections between English and Icelandic, *thole* evidently being one of them. Of course, the monolingual reader of *Independent People* will not be consciously aware of this upon encountering, for example 'flit'. Nevertheless, just as Heaney's careful consideration of etymology in his translation of *Beowulf* contributes a great deal to the overall effect of the text, so Thompson's use of cognates is significant. The way in which the English language has developed over the centuries and been influenced by other languages means that favouring words with a certain etymology can have a distinct effect on the register of the text.

---

[47] Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (London: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 2001), p. xxv.

[48] *Ibid*, pp. xxv – xxvi.

It is conceivable, although of course this is little more than speculation, that Thompson, as a man from the north of England, was more familiar with unusual words of this kind than if he had been from the south. Such words tend to be more prevalent in northern dialects than southern, a fact which has been directly linked to the geographical bounds of the Danelaw. 'Flit', 'bigging' and 'tarn' are all marked as northern and Scottish dialectical words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, though 'tarn' is now also used as a technical term by geologists and geographers.[49] These words all carry the suggestion of a certain sort of northern English: rural, rustic, uneducated (since education has traditionally been associated with standard language use, and lack of education with dialectal language). This register is particularly fitting for *Independent People*, a novel that deals mainly with rural, uneducated, decidedly unmodern folk. In a subtle way the dialectical vocabulary even calls to mind the landscape of Scotland and the north (tarn in particular), often a bleaker and harsher terrain than the south. Nobody could mistake the rural Iceland of *Independent People* for northern England, but Thompson's use of language here helps to encourage subtle associations that apply to both.

Whether Thompson was influenced by his northern background or not, he was certainly not alone in his use of cognates, where the pairs are made up of standard words in the Icelandic and far more unusual in English. There is a marked tendency amongst other English writers who studied Old Icelandic or the modern language to favour these sorts of words. The nineteenth-century Icelandophile, saga enthusiast and translator Sabine Baring-Gould made frequent use of words such as 'flit', 'bonder',

---

[49] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn., ed. by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989)

‘spoor’ and ‘byre’ (*flytja*, *bóndi*, *spor*, *bær*) in his account of a trip to Iceland;[50] William Morris referred to men as ‘carles’ (*karlar*) in his own travel narrative, to name one of many examples;[51] George Dasent’s famous translation of *Njáls saga* is filled with words such as ‘thrall’, ‘house-carle’ and ‘wroth’ (*þræll*, *húskarl*, *reiður*).[52] One might say that a particular sort of English has been created by these, and other, English writers who have studied Old Norse and modern Icelandic. Although Thompson does not write the mock-medieval prose of Dasent (understandably since his source text is rather more modern than *Njáls saga*), he is still a part of this long tradition, as his use of dialectical and archaic cognates shows. Through translation and interaction with other languages, the English language itself is used in ways that almost certainly would not occur to a monolingual original author. In this way, we can see that the practice of translation is inherently creative, encouraging new and original usage of the target language.

However, interestingly, there are other parts of *Independent People* in which Thompson appears to use very subtle domesticating techniques that work to situate the novel within the English literary tradition. He occasionally words things in such a way, unprompted by the source text, as to call to mind certain works of English literature:

IS Gamla konan haltraði frammá prikið sitt til móts við hana, - **blessuð skepnan**, tautaði hún, veri hún velkomin. [p. 270]

EN The old woman hobbled forward on her stick to meet her.

[50] Sabine Baring-Gould, *Iceland: Its Scenes and Sagas* (London: Smith, Elder and co., 1863).
[51] William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris Volume VIII: Journals of Travel in Iceland, 1871-1873* (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1911).
[52] *The Story of Burnt Njal*, trans. by George Dasent (London: J.M Dent & Sons Ltd., 1911) (Originally published 1861).

“**Thrice-blessed creature**,” she mumbled, “welcome, and a blessing on her.” [pp. 174 – 175]

IS Aftur og aftur þóttist hann ráða niðurlögum Gríms, **senda hann til andskotans með hinum ógleymanlega hætti rímunnar** … [p. 146]

EN Again and again he imagined that he had made an end of Grimur and **sent him howling to hell in the poet’s immortal words** … [p. 94]

These cannot really be called direct references as such. They are more unconscious echoes that, in a subtle way, tie *Independent People* in with the English literary tradition. Why should Thompson have written ‘thrice-blessed’ instead of simply ‘blessed’, which would have been the obvious translation of *blessuð* as it appears in the source text? One possible interpretation of this decision is that ‘thrice-blessed’ calls Shakespeare to mind. Specifically the line “Thrice-blessed they that master so their blood”[53] from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but the use of ‘thrice’ as an intensifier is common in Shakespeare: “thrice-double”[54], “thrice-welcome”[55], “thrice-gentle”,[56] to name but a few examples.

It is impossible to say whether Thompson consciously had Shakespeare in mind when translating this passage, but the language of Shakespeare is so deeply ingrained in the literary culture, and indeed everyday language, of English-speaking countries that it is perfectly possible to reference it almost unconsciously. Shakespeare is undoubtedly

[53] *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I. 1. 74.
[54] *The Tempest*, V. 1. 296.
[55] *Twelfth Night*, V. 1. 241.
[56] *Othello*, III. 4. 122.

one of the best-known writers in the English literary canon; essentially everybody, and especially those who have a higher education in English literature as Thompson did, is familiar with Shakespearean language. The use of 'thrice-blessed' taps into this cultural subconscious in the English-speaking reader.

'Howling to hell' is also an interesting turn of phrase that echoes the line "The Devils ran howling, deafened, down to Hell" from Byron's *The Vision of Judgement*. More significantly, though, the alliteration (in both Byron and Thompson's words) is reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon poetry. In particular, it calls to mind *Beowulf*, the greatest surviving Old English epic and one of the founding blocks of the English vernacular literary tradition. It is interesting to note that whilst Laxness writes *með hinum ógleymanlega hætti rímunnar*, referring to an entire literary genre, Thompson has 'in the poet's immortal words', an anonymous yet singular figure, much like the nameless author of *Beowulf* and other such epics. 'Howling to hell' is indeed not the only phrase in this section that jumps out as positively 'Beowulfian':

IS … í návígi við eiturspýjandi **heljarþegna**… [p. 147]

EN … fighting at close quarters with the poison-spewing **thanes of hell**… [p. 94]

'Thane' is yet another archaic cognate. An instant association is Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, yet the word also features prominently in modern translations of *Beowulf* (the Old English is *þegn*, identical to the Icelandic); it is certainly part of what might be termed a 'Beowulfian' register in modern English. Moreover, translations have included

phrasing such as “the hell-thane shrieking in sore defeat”[57] and “the hate of the hell-thane”.[58] In light of this, although ‘thanes of hell’ is a direct translation from the source text, it can be counted amongst the other examples discussed above. Though the *rímur* do not really correspond to *Beowulf* within the literary traditions of Iceland and Britain, being more recent and more comparable in form to “the metrical romances of England and Germany in the High and late Middle Ages”,[59] *Beowulf* does include the narrative of a hero defeating a supernatural enemy, as Bjartur imagines himself battling ‘Grímur’ while struggling through the snowstorm. This register is then fitting in the context. These few examples indicate that Thompson’s prose was clearly influenced by texts other than *Sjálfstætt fólk* itself. If some of the culture and history behind *Sjálfstætt fólk* is lost for readers of *Independent People*, such as the significance of *deyr fé* and Búkolla, then there is plenty in the novel that situates the work within the target culture. This is part of what makes *Independent People* an effective work of literature as a whole, independent of the source text.

[57] *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic*, trans. by Charles W. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 27.
[58] *The Tale of Beowulf Done Out of the Old English Tongue*, trans. by William Morris and A. J. Wyatt (London: Kelmscott Press, 1895), p. 6.
[59] Vésteinn Ólason, ‘Old Icelandic Poetry’, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, ed. by Daisy Neijmann (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), p. 73.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have sought to explore the translation of Halldór Laxness' *Sjálfstætt fólk* into English as a creative process. The main body of this dissertation has examined the ways in which J.A. Thompson tackled some very specific translation problems, and attempted to show that creativity was a necessary part of their solution. On practically every page of the novel there were many more challenges that I did not cover, in order to include a focused and thorough analysis of those that I did. A comprehensive overview of the entire translation was beyond the scope of this dissertation, although much more could certainly have been said on the subject. What emerged from my close analyses, however, are points that I believe may nevertheless be applied to the translation as a whole. *Independent People* is a highly successful work of literature, and not only because the same can be said of *Sjálfstætt fólk* (although this is of course of paramount significance) but also because of what J.A. Thompson brings as an original author to the work. There is much in *Independent People* that comes from Thompson rather than Laxness, and this is not a failure on the part of the translator. On the contrary, I believe it is the very reason for the success of the novel as a work of literature.

It is also important to note that the argument about creativity in translation does not apply solely to the English translation of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, which is simply one example used as an illustration in this thesis. The more general theoretical arguments explored in the first part of the thesis, and the third chapter in particular, are applicable

to all translation, and particularly literary translation. Not all literary translators are creative in the same ways, and there is as much difference to be found amongst them as amongst original authors. However, in its essence, translation is a creative process, no less than the composition of an original work of literature. At first glance, original and translation might seem like antonyms. On the contrary, the two terms are inextricably linked. A translation is not a derivative work but simply a new and different original.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnstone, Willis, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993)

Baring-Gould, Sabine, *Iceland: Its Scenes and Sagas* (London: Smith, Elder and co., 1863)

Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969)

Bassnett-McGuire, Susan, *Translation Studies* (London: Methuen, 1980)

Bassnet, Susan, and André Lefevere, eds, *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* (Clevedon: Cromwell Press, 1998)

Bassnett, Susan, and André Lefevere, eds, *Translation, History and Culture* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990)

Boase-Beier, Jean, and Michael Holman, eds, *The Practices of Literary Translation: Constraints and Creativity* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1998)

Dasent, George, trans., *The Story of Burnt Njal* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1911)

Derrida, Jacques, 'Des tours de Babel', trans. by Joseph F. Graham, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 191-225

Derrida, Jacques, *Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. by Christie V. McDonald, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985)

Eyvindur P. Eiríksson, ed., *Hávamál með skýringum* (Reykjavík: Ásatrúarfélagið, 2007)

Gauti Kristmannsson, *Literary Diplomacy I: The Role of Translation in the Construction of National Literatures in Britain and Germany 1750-1830* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005)

Gauti Kristmannsson, *Literary Diplomacy II: Translation without an Original* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005)

Gísli Már Gíslason, 'Enskur þýðandi Sjálfstæðs fólks', *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (28 March 1998), p. 20

Halldór Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness: Ævisaga* (Reykjavík: JPV, 2004)

Halldór Guðmundsson, 'In Search of the Most Precious Pearl: On the Life and Works of Halldór Laxness', trans. by Victoria Cribb, *Scandinavica*, 42.1 (May 2003), pp. 29-46

Halldór Laxness, *Skáldatími* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1963; repr. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1993)

Halldór Laxness, *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1987)

Halldór Laxness, *Independent People*, trans. by J.A. Thompson (New York: Vintage, 1997)

Hannibal Valdimarsson, 'Málleysur og ómenning á ábyrgð og kostnað "Máls og Menningar"', *Skutull*, 19.34 (September 1941), p. 132

Heaney, Seamus, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (London: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2001)

Kennedy, Charles W., trans., *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978)

Loffredo, Eugenia, and Manuela Perteghella, eds, *Translating and Creativity: Perspectives on Creative Writing and Translation Studies* (London: Continuum, 2006)

Magnusson, Magnus, 'The Fish Can Sing: Translation and Reception of Halldór Laxness in the UK and USA', *Scandinavica*, 42.1 (May 2003), pp. 13-28

Morris, William, *The Collected Works of William Morris Volume VIII: Journals of Travel in Iceland, 1871-1873* (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1911)

Morris, William and A. J. Wyatt, trans., *The Tale of Beowulf Done Out of the Old English Tongue* (London: Kelmscott Press, 1895)

Munday, Jeremy, 'The Creative Voice of the Translator of Latin American Literature', *Romance Studies*, 27.4, (November 2009), pp. 246 – 258

Munday, Jeremy, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2012)

Mörður Árnason, ed., *Íslensk orðabók*, 4th edn. (Reykjavík: Edda, 2007)

Neijmann, Daisy, ed., *A History of Icelandic Literature* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006)

Ólafur Ragnarsson, *Halldór Laxness: Líf í skáldskap* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2002)

Ólafur Ragnarsson, *Til fundar við skáldið Halldór Laxness* (Reykjavík: Veröld, 2007)

Proust, Marcel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vol II, trans by C.K. Scott-Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006)

Pym, Anthony, *Exploring Translation Theories* (London: Routledge, 2010)

Robinson, Douglas, ed., *Western Translation Theory: From Herodotus to Nietzsche*, (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997)

Simpson, J.A. and E.S.C. Weiner, eds, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)

Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York: The John Hopkins Press, 1957)

Steiner, George, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

Venuti, Lawrence, *The Translator's Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995)

Venuti, Lawrence, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2004)