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Forty Fables, and: Sonnets, and: Quatrains (review)

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(Review)

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the movement's hegemony in the third phase – the decline and fall of the empire. Inasmuch as this applies to the history of Translation Studies, one must simply hope that the last phase is still not imminent. The militant overconfidence of the first is over, yet the newly gained tolerance has not wiped out the long-cherished dream of a hard discipline. With the rise of a subdiscipline focusing on European Shakespeares, the study of translations has more tasks than ever before, and by now its methodology has become sophisticated enough to do them.

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Forty Fables, by Jean de la Fontaine. Translated by Hugh Gaston Hall. Pp. 48. Kenilworth: H. G. Hall, 2002. Hb. £10.

Sonnets. By Hugh Gaston Hall. Pp. 64. Kenilworth: H. G. Hall, 2002. Hb. £10.

Quatrains. By Hugh Gaston Hall. Pp. 88. Kenilworth: H. G. Hall, 2004. Hb. £10.

Children and animals are notoriously shunned by actors. Stories for children or about animals are sometimes deprecated by literary academics, especially where there is rhyme; which may explain why this review comes to you from outside Academe. Victor Hugo in *How to be a Grandfather*, his last book of poetry, listed some of the animal fabulists (here in my translation):

Animals talk; and an expert knows
 Their songs, cries, rages, joys and woes.
 Puss-in-Boots; Homer's wonderful horses;
 Phaedruss, scribbling down the beasts' discourses;
 La Fontaine in the long grass lying,
 Watching from the undergrowth, dreaming, spying.
 Aesop, thinker with a back like Pindus,
 Heard them in Greece; Bidpai on the Indus.
 Twilight jargon of limpid lagoons
 Revealed to Florian, officer of dragoons;
 Bald-headed prophet Ezekiel
 Was a wild man, listened to wild beasts as well.

Aesop belongs to the select band of ancient Greek writers who were famous even before the Renaissance, as his shortened name indicates. He is by far the lightest of these. His own text is lost: he survives in the Latin of Phaedruss, a freedman of Augustus, and the slightly later Greek of Babrius. The fourteenth-century monk Maximus Planudes wrote

an apocryphal Life. Caxton's Aesop of 1484 was contemporary with editions in seven other languages. Aesop and Phaedrus were ex-slaves, as was 'Uncle Remus'. Aesop's reputation was not always secure. Cræsus, hearing him recite, set him free; Aristophanes knew he was popular; Socrates versified some of his fables in prison; Lysippus made a statue of him in Athens. Yet we read that he was thrown over a precipice by the priests of Delphi, infuriated at his witty blasphemies. Pilpai, or (in Hugo's list) Bidpai is another fabulist not extant in his own voice, the earliest text being in Arabic, c.750. A French version appeared in 1644, and a combined edition of all these fabulists in 1660. Charles Perrault, the source of half our pantomimes, is represented in Hugo's lines by Puss-in-Boots; he published his *Contes* in 1697. Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian, 1755–94, was a nephew of Voltaire. Hugo's 'expert' was the physiocrat Dupont de Nemours, who insisted that animals can speak, and have souls. He fell foul of the Convention and fled to the USA, where his son founded the famous chemical business.

Hugo's own *How to be a Grandfather* includes the 'Epic Story of the Lion', a tale of a beast mightier than man, and nobler:

"King! You have shamefully assailed
Me, though I have not harmed your child.
I tell you this from far afield:
At dawn tomorrow I'll arrive
In your city, with your boy alive.
I invite as audience all your valets:
I shall eat your child inside your palace."

Hugo, taking his little grand-daughter to the zoo, mused that God may be found in the animal kingdom:

I like the wild beasts too, I won't deny.
You they amuse, and me they edify.
It's surely by design that God displayed,
In these fierce heads, the jungles' light and shade.

Born to protest, to probe, and to believe,
I see the sneaking asp beneath the rose.
The flower fears not the serpent, but yet Eve
Must fear the fiend. I delve these sombre laws.

La Fontaine, in later life, wondered whether animals had souls. His reputation rests most importantly on four collections of *Fables* published between 1668 and 1694, some arguably revisions of those already published; about 240 fables in all. He devoted years to perfecting this masterpiece, drawing on a diversity of sources from Aesop himself to Thomas Willis, the English anatomist of the brain,

and containing, in common with other masterpieces listed by Cyril Connolly's *Palinurus*, 'the maximum of emotion compatible with a classical sense of form'. His *Contes* (1665), more risqué versified stories after Boccaccio, were dismissed by Geoffrey Grigson (in his introduction to James Michie's version of the *Fables*) as mostly tiresome. But Grigson was writing before Guido Waldman's translation (reviewed in this journal in Vol. 10, 2001), which conjures up Ogden Nash. The *Fables* have never wanted translators, from La Fontaine's contemporaries or near-contemporaries Anne Finch, John Dennis, or Bernard Mandeville to the hundred or so titles currently available.

Thus, in translating forty *Fables* into English, Gaston Hall has put himself into formidable company: James Michie (1979), Norman Shapiro (over four volumes, starting in 1988), Sir Edward Marsh (1924, and often reprinted, sometimes with illustrations by De La Nézière), both Christopher Wood (1995, with Maya Slater's judicious introduction) and Stanley Appelbaum (1997) in paperback. And then there is Marianne Moore, printed first in 1954. Astonishingly, Moore translated almost all the *Fables*; for the others, a rough hundred is par. She praises La Fontaine's 'surgical kind of courtesy'. She seeks to follow Ezra Pound's principles: 'the natural order of words, subject, predicate, object; the active voice where possible; a ban on dead words, rhymes synonymous with gusto'. It can be a relief to turn from several rhymed versions of the *Fables*, all more or less mannered and contorted, to Appelbaum's lucid, elegant, serviceable, 'literal' line-by-line translation. But at their best, rhymes win out. There are other editions treasured for their pictures, by Gustave Doré (with Walter Thornbury's complete translation of 1868), Alexander Calder (1946, for Eunice Clark's translation), Richard Scarry (for his own 1963 adaptation), and Marc Chagall (originally done in the late 1920s), beautifully reprinted in colour, attached to the 1841 English text by Elizur Wright, playfully typeset (1997). Wright astutely wished that Cowper had translated La Fontaine.

Hugh Gaston Hall is a distinguished scholar who has now collected his translations and original poems, some of them written as far back as the 1950s. These volumes are self-published, but they are not only handsomely presented, they are worth reading, and can be read with much pleasure. A report on his *Fables* may start with a couple of perhaps petty reservations. Hall's version of the very first fable gives La Fontaine's 'cigale' as 'grasshopper'. There is precedent for this: Moore has 'Until fall, a grasshopper / Chose to chirr /... She chirred a recurrent chant / Of want beside an ant.' But why? the playboy look of the word? the dancing? Grasshopper is *sauterelle*, the *cigale* is a cricket.

Again, La Fontaine ends the fable of sour grapes (III.11) with ‘Fit-il pas mieux que de se plaindre?’ Hall has: ‘Did he do more than just complain?’ Marsh makes better sense: ‘I like his pose: ’twas better than complaining.’ In ‘The Lion Grown Old’ (III.14), where Marsh has ‘The Horse came close, and gave his Lord a kick, / The Wolf a bite, the Ox a gore’, Hall has the awkward ‘First horse with hoof approaches to engage. / With tooth strikes wolf, the steer with horn.’ Why not ‘Wolf strikes with tooth, and steer with horn’? Because it is more fun to evoke the *mêlée*, rouse the shade of Beowulf, make a chiasmus ... or because poetry is wild, unprosaic.

In ‘The Cock and the Pearl’ (I.20) both Hall and Marsh are elegant:

A dunce inherited	Inheriting a manuscript,
A Manuscript, and sped	One quite unlettered fellow
To show it to a scholar.	Went straight to a bookseller.
‘I’m sure ’tis rare,’ said he,	“It’s good, I think,” he said, “not
But any common dollar	torn or ripped,
Would be more use to me.’	But any money I obtain
(Marsh)	Would better suit my vein.”
	(Hall)

La Fontaine has ‘Un ignorant hérita / D’un manuscrit, qu’il porta / Chez son voisin le libraire. / “Je crois, dit-il, qu’il est bon; / Mais le moindre ducaton / Serait bien mieux mon affaire.”’ Michie and Moore have:

An ignoramus took	A blockhead was bequeathed a book
An old manuscript book	In manuscript, which he took
Left to him in a will	To a nearby connoisseur,
To his neighbour the bibliophile:	Remarking, “A rarity –
‘I think it’s very fine,	But a mere ha’penny
But money’s more in my line.’	Would afford me what I would prefer.”
(Michie)	(Moore)

Moore’s version is like the ghost of a limerick.

Hall’s version of ‘The Jay Adorned with Peacock’s Plumes’ (IV.9) concludes well:

Full many a biped jay like him parades
 In spoils from other men collected:
 We call them plagiarists.
 I’m silent on such escapades,
 Avoid such twists.

‘Biped’ is good, as birds are bipeds anyway; we see the villains as strutting birds. Shapiro is good too, despite the padding (which I’ve bracketed):

One also sees [– wherever one may turn –]
The human jay: the shameless plagiarist.
But let him be; I'll not insist.
Surely that's none of my concern.

Michie is the very deft and urbane translator of Martial, Catullus, the Odes of Horace, and the like. He is the ace in this pack. Grigson introduces his versions as 'earthier and sharper than Marianne Moore's' – true – 'and without that coyness into which Edward Marsh often collapses'. Yet Michie needs eight lines for this passage.

By contrast, both Shapiro and Hall round off 'The Earthen Pot and the Iron Pot' (V.2) rather too briefly:

My advice, therefore:	With equals only let us find our place,
Keep to your kind. Because, if not,	Or fear lest otherwise our lot
You too may get the fate he got.	Resemble that of some such pot.
(Shapiro)	(Hall)

I prefer Michie:

One should only associate
With equals. He who does not
Is sure to suffer the fate
Of the vulnerable pot.

Occasionally La Fontaine raises the poetry to a level where only Moore can follow. The Oak tells the Reed (I.22): 'Mais vous naissez souvent / Sur les humides bords du royaume du vent.' Michie has: 'But you reeds are generally found / On the moist borders of the kingdom of the storm.' Hall does well: 'But generally you breed / In wetlands where winds gain most speed.' Marsh has: 'But you are born beyond my friendly screen, / On the moist borders of the wind's demesne.' Moore has: 'But you reeds are usually found / On the misty fringe of the wind's domain.' The difference is slight, but crucial. Again, at the end of the same poem, on the wind's redoubling its efforts, where La Fontaine famously has 'Et fait si bien qu'il déracine / Celui de qui la tête au ciel était voisine, / Et dont les pieds touchaient à l'empire des morts', Moore writes:

Until the hurricane threw prone
That thing of kingly height whose head had almost touched God's throne
Who had shot its root to the threshold of death's door.

Moore is a major poet. The penultimate line is the setting for the final jewel. Here are two more of her felicities. At the opening of the King Log fable (III.4), where the frogs grow so tiresomely noisy – 'Que Jupin les soumit au pouvoir monarchique. / Il leur tomba du ciel un Roi tout

pacifique' – Moore has 'Till Jupiter sent a king to calm their constant croak. / He sent them one who fell from the sky and never spoke.' And concluding 'The Fox and the Stork' (I.18), for 'Trompeurs, c'est pour vous que j'écris: / Attendez-vous à la pareille' she gives: 'My words here are particularly / Addressed to foxes without fur.' This is snappier even than Wood's cleverly rhymed 'Tricksters, it's for you I write: / Biters will be bit: don't bite.'

Hall ends his book strongly with 'A Mogul's Dream' (XI.4, from Sa'di) and 'The Two Goats' (XII.4), both representing the quietism of La Fontaine's later years. In the one he does justice to the famous conclusion in praise of the simple, rural life:

To all that now I pledge new sacrifice.
The moment, when it comes, to seek the dead,
A life untroubled I
Shall then have lived and then
Without remorse shall die.

In the other the obstinate goats go down with flags flying:

Led toward each other by a fate unknown,
They reach a stream with but a board for bridge:
To meet head-on two stoats could ill afford
On such a board;

...

For failure to back down, both had to pay:
They fell into the stream as one –
A thing quite often done
In Fortune's way.

The English 'stoats' (for 'belettes') are perhaps not so characteristically diminutive as to make the point.

Hall takes thirty-three of his forty fables from the first series of 1668, which includes the most famous, mostly from Aesop, and the shortest, simplest, most suited to the young: his dedicatee was the seven-year old Dauphin. Better the fox and goat in the well (III.5), the poet suggests, than the story of Crassus invading Parthia, to teach a child about exit strategy. Hall's longest fables are the plague fable (VII.1) and 'Against the Squeamish' (II.1) in which La Fontaine sees off his critics:

Had I at birth received the gifts the Muse
Her lovers promised, I would use
Them for the fables of Aesop.
Fables and verse are old, old friends.

Quand j'aurais en naissant reçu de Calliope
Les dons qu'à ses amants cette Muse a promis,

Je les consacrerai aux mensonges d'Ésope:
Les mensonges et les vers de tout temps sont amis.

'Fables' for 'mensonges' is good; but why invert 'Promised her lovers' and send readers to the French for the sense? Hall wisely omits the heavier philosophical material such as 'Disquisition Addressed to Mme de la Sablière' and its sequel, 'The Two Rats, the Fox and the Egg', both from the end of Book IX, and both pondering whether animals have souls. Either of these would have unbalanced his selection. For all Hall's delights, the very youngest readers would prefer the version by Marie Ponsot, now reprinted with illustrations by Soon Chun Cho (2003):

The finest of fish is the fish in your dish:
Finicky folk never get their wish.

In all three volumes, Hall's rhymes are pure, and, allowed conventional licenses, the metres regular – allowing too that in translating *La Fontaine* he takes after the relatively free metrical patterns of the original. He offers indeed a defence of rhyme for the sort of meditative poetry he writes, 'for its musicality, for its help in driving home points and for making them memorable'. He writes precisely and concisely. Inversions are too frequent: the modernist edict has passed him by. His virtues are well suited to some poems, and his vices forgivable in them.

Half the *Sonnets* and *Quatrains* are translations from French, Spanish, and Italian, the sonnets mostly of the Renaissance and Golden Age. Here are two Golden Age epigrams of Villamediana: 'In prison is the nightingale / In irons which cause him pain; / Nor do his friends complain / That silences, not songs, prevail.' 'He stepped into the bullring thronged / Most elegantly clad / With diamonds on his sash which had / To lovers of his wife belonged.' The same qualities are less suited to the high romantic age: Lamartine's 'The Lake' emerges too much like Thomas Hood. But 'The Lorelei' – impossible task! – is rather well done. The longer lines of 'To the Women of Cuba' by Gertrudis Gómez hint at the lyrical beauty which is realized in the rhymes of Bécquer. There are fine versions of Rubén Darío, Juan de Dios Pesa, and especially a set of José Martí: 'I am a man sincere / From where the palm-trees grow.' The *Sonnets* feature an impressive 'To Washington', also by Gertrudis Gómez. In Du Bellay's 'Heureux qui comme Ulysse', Hall starts the rhyming with: 'Odysseus / ... or like him / ... duteous / ... interim', before treading the beaten track. There are good sets of Michelangelo and Garcilaso de la Vega.

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