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Okot p'Bitek. *The Defence of Lawino: A New Translation of Wer pa Lawino by Taban lo Liyong.* Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2001. xxvi + 115 pp. $11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-9970-02-269-4.

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A New Lawino?

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Taban lo Liyong and his publishers (Fountain in Kampala) and distributors (ABC in Oxford) are to be praised for this new and illuminating version of *Wer pa Lawino*. The appearance of a second English version of Okot p'Bitek's long poem is of course slightly paradoxical, given the poem's content and given both Okot's and Taban lo Liyong's positions on the need to promote African language literatures. While the language question remains perennially vexed and vexing, the reappearance in a new version of this classic statement of cultural nationalism opens up fertile ground for translation theory and prompts further questions about appropriate post-(rather than anti-) colonial responses to African politics and neo-colonial globalization.

When Okot first published his self-translated *Song of Lawino* in 1966, he stated that he had clipped the wings of the original Acholi poem. For non-Acholi speakers who read his poem with excitement and relish, it was difficult to tell whether he really had mangled the original or whether he was being falsely modest. Okot's friend and colleague Taban lo Liyong thinks that Okot's translation panders to English and English-speaking African readers by highlighting the poem's "drama, humour, and…striking figures of speech" (*Defence* p. xv). His own translation, therefore, on which he has worked on and off for decades, sets out to be more faithful to the Acholi original and hence to "return the discussion to where it was: Lawino's discoursing on African ways of life to fellow Africans without too much consciousness about the presence of the whites" (p. xvi).

Having earlier criticized Okot for letting "a mere catechist criticize the West and Westernization" and in "simple" terms with little attempt at systematic intellectual argument,[1] Taban lo Liyong stresses in his new Preface the "deep philosophy" (p. xv) of Lawino–"the wisdom of the ancestors compiled and thematically parcelled by Okto p'Bitek" (p. xvii)–; hence, Okot's "Song" becomes Taban lo Liyong's "Defence" or thesis, and Okot's "Chapters" become "Submissions" presented before a "council of elders" (p. xi).

Taban lo Liyong's general difference of approach to translating the poem comes out in the details of his choice of diction, syntax, and style, too. These differences are sufficiently marked to justify the project because even a very cursory comparison reveals that to read *Song of Lawino* is not at all the same thing as to read *The Defence of Lawino*. In terms of structure and content, *Song of Lawino* has thirteen sections against the *Defence*'s fourteen, while many of the sections have been truncated or telescoped. Both versions eschew the rhyme of *Wer pa Lawino*, but Taban lo Liyong more closely reproduces the longer line-length and greater regularity of rhythm in the original Acholi.

In regard to poems in English, I have to say I still find Okot's version more powerful than Taban lo Liyong's. In section three, for instance, Taban lo Liyong's version runs as follows:

The dancers would all smoke cigarettes, like Europeans / Both women and men: smoke like Europeans / They would all suck their cheeks, like Europeans / They would all suck their tongues, like Europeans / They would lick the saliva from their mouths, like Europeans / Leaving men's mouths plastered with paints, of Europeans / With which their women had smeared their lips (p. 14).

Okot's version ("You kiss her on the cheek / As white people do, / You kiss her open-sore lips / As white people do" [*Song* p. 42] is far pithier, its graphic imagery rendered more effective by Okot's opting for a second-person verb-form, and for the present rather than conditional tense. Reading the two versions side by side is occasionally like reading Achebe's English, in which Africanization is achieved by content and vocabulary, against Gabriel Okara's, in which Ijaw idiom and syntax are reproduced. In section six, for example, where

Okot repeatedly uses "stoves", on one occasion Taban lo Liyong has Lawino produce the Okara-esque compound "fire-tops," an attempt at defamiliarization that, whatever its accuracy, seems scarcely convincing. Elsewhere, Taban lo Liyong displays a more uneven use of register than in Okot's version. Whereas Okot's Lawino speaks a consistently forceful and frank English, Taban lo Liyong's Lawino shifts between direct colloquialism ("messes me up" p. 34) and an archaic formality verging on pomposity (e.g., "Atop the pressure-stove…" (p. 34), or "It entails waking up betimes" (p. 48), or the odd mixture of "Father and mum" (p. 101).

One of the most interesting points of comparison in the two translations, however, is in the retention or non-retention of selected Acholi words. Okot's version, which is more fluently English in idiom, syntax, and phrasing, generally does not translate Acholi words for plants, customs, artefacts, dances, musical instruments, etc. specific to Acholi culture.

Taban lo Liyong's practice is less consistent, but when he does translate such terms into English equivalents, the effect markedly dilutes the poem's Afrocentrism (or Acholi-centrism) which damages our sense of Lawino's being completely rooted in and deeply confident of the value of her own culture. For example, *Defence* has Lawino referring to Ocol's ineptness "at playing the gourd percussion, or responding in the chorus" (p. 20); the latter phrase, in particular, has much less cultural specificity than *Song*'s version in which Lawino castigates Ocol for his inability to "beat rhythm on the half-gourd / Or shake the rattle-gourd / To the rhythm of the *orak* dance" (p. 50). Similarly, *Defence*'s use of "lyres" and "castanets"–both instruments with very precise European referents–at least partly invalidates G.A. Heron's claim that the great strength of *Song* is its abandonment of stock European imagery.

Ultimately, the value of *The Defence of Lawino* may lie in what it allows us to infer about Okot's English poetics. In some ways reading Taban lo Liyong's version after long familiarity with Okot's is like reading Valerie Eliot's facsimile of *The Waste Land* after long familiarity with that seminal poem, but it seems to me that the anglophone Okot was the Acholi Okot's own *miglior fabbro*. The choices he made were good ones.

Frequently, as with Pound's pruning of *The Waste Land*, they involved omitting sections and phrases that would have grated on English-trained ears and English-trained taste. More significantly (and less subjectively), they have to do with structure and characterization. *Song* gives us a much more coherent and consistent Lawino whose personal anger with her husband is more satisfactorily tied to the broader anger she (and Okot and Taban lo Liyong) displays with men like him who in becoming Westernized have shunned their roots. We see the relative effectiveness of Okot's version most strongly in section eleven where Okot has Lawino addressing her husband the politician directly (as "You…"), while *Defence* has her talking about politicians in general (as "They…"). Above all, *Song* preserves the force of metaphor, not least in the central, proverbial injunction not to uproot the pumpkin, where Taban lo Liyong's version is apt to explain the metaphor or otherwise weaken it by cumbersome literalness.

This review has largely concerned itself with comparison between linguistic choices rather than the original content of *Wer pa Lawino*, and given the thirty-five year lag between the appearance of the two versions, I think it is fair to approach *The Defence of Lawino* in this literary-academic manner. However, as S. Raditlhalo rather belligerently puts it in his preface, "the battle is not yet won, the homesteads must be repaired" (p. ix). The question might be, though, whether the battles of the '60s (of the generation of Okot and Taban lo Liyong) are really the same as those Africans (we all) still need to fight in the twenty-first century. Especially in the face of the scourge of AIDS, and in light of what we know about the value of educating women, some aspects of Lawino's wholesale rejection of Western science, medicine, and labor-saving technology still need to be viewed with some skepticism. Latter-day Lawinos should definitely continue to urge their Ocols not to uproot the pumpkin, but equally emphatically they should not throw any babies out with the bathwater.

Notes

[1]. See G.A. Heron's "Introduction" (pp. 13-14) to the Heinemann African Writers Series edition of *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1984).

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