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Luzel's Ghosts: The unfinished business of translating folktales for performance

Michael Wilson

Introduction

Amongst the very many folktales collected by François-Marie Luzel (1821-95) (and occasionally by his sister Perrine (1829-1915)) in his native Lower Brittany in the closing decades of the nineteenth century are a number of ghost stories, as might reasonably be expected. Most of these are relatively short, when compared to the longer wonder tales, and many are told as memorates, that is personal encounters with the supernatural with specific local settings. A reading of Luzel's own accounts of the *veillées*¹ he attended, and where he collected many of his stories, reveals that often these ghost stories were told in an informal style, as

¹ *Veillées* were social gatherings, held mainly during the dark months of winter, where neighbours would meet for entertainment, consisting largely of conversation, storytelling and singing. Luzel here describes a *veillée* on Christmas Eve, which took place at his childhood home:

The weather is cold and snow covers the ground. The Christmas *veillée* begins. With the evening meal finished, after the life of the day's saint has been read in Breton and the communal prayers recited, the whole household - masters, servants, children and day labourers - come together in a circle around the Yule log, an enormous oak trunk that burns in the vast kitchen fireplace. A wandering bard and beggarman, old Iouenn Garandel, has arrived at nightfall looking for hospitality, his bag thoroughly decorated with newly printed ballad-sheets and poems on loose-leaf paper (...) and he has been received with joy and happiness, especially by the children, and he has been shown to the storyteller's stool, at the corner of the hearth, with a full bowl of golden cider on hand. He begins by recounting the latest news from the parishes that he's passed through since his last visit: deaths, births, engagements, accidents and adventures of all sorts. Then he sings the old ballad of *Lezobré* and the whole audience hangs on to the old man's every word, whose memory is inexhaustible when it comes to talking about the old days.

(Luzel, 1995b, 169-170)

Georges Zimmermann draws parallels between the *veillée*, the Irish *ceilidh* and other similar traditions throughout Europe (2001, 457-58). See also Sumner, Hillers and McKenna (2105) for a discussion of the recreation of a traditional Irish storytelling event on film. Robert Darnton describes the *veillée* as "an important French institution" (1984, 17).

conversations between various attendees in between the longer tales (see Luzel, 2002). Luzel was certainly no stranger to the ghost stories that inhabited the towns and villages where he lived.

It was Jack Zipes in 2007 who first introduced me to Luzel, as a major French folklorist of the nineteenth century whose works had been largely and inexplicably neglected in the English-speaking world² and was only at that time enjoying a revival of interest in France, following the republication of his work by Presses Universitaires de Rennes under the editorship of Françoise Morvan. Since then I have been engaged in an ongoing, albeit sporadic, project to engage with, and translate, some of Luzel's tales, bringing to bear on this process the experience of a scholar of storytelling and vernacular performance and the sensibilities of someone who worked for a number of years as a practitioner within the contemporary storytelling scene in the UK. It has been a continual process of learning and re-learning and in this essay I would like to focus on two related ideas: first, that looking at storytelling from the perspective of theatre scholarship may afford fresh insights into storytelling practice and, consequently, by considering the texts of storytelling as theatrical texts may encourage new ways of understanding those texts; second that the act of translation, especially the translation of oral folktales, is best understood as an act of *performance* itself, with all the implications that that carries.

Ghosts

When I am talking about Luzel's ghosts, it is not, in fact, the ghosts within those stories collected by Luzel to which I am referring on this occasion, but rather to an idea of the ghosts that inhabit all storytelling landscapes. In the context of storytelling this is an idea that when a storyteller tells a story, behind them stand the ghosts of all the previous storytellers who have told that story, as if in a long,

² Translations of Luzel's folktales have occasionally appeared within larger anthologies of French or Breton folktales in English, but the only volume to date dedicated entirely to Luzel's tales in English has been Derek Bryce's *Celtic Folktales from Armorica* (1985), which brings together twelve stories from *Contes Populaires de Basse-Bretagne* (1887).

unbroken chain of oral transmission³. The idea offers a genealogy not of the story, but of the *storytellings* that have enabled and led to this particular performance moment. Furthermore it suggests that all storytelling performances take place in the context of other, previous storytelling performances and are consequently informed and shaped by those earlier performances.

As an idea this is something that is very attractive to many contemporary storytellers, not least because it allows them to locate themselves within an unbroken oral tradition of storytelling practice and in a community of performers that places great value on 'tradition' and holds its tradition bearers in great reverence, it gives an opportunity for individual performers, who are themselves just as likely have come from a metropolitan, university-educated background, to understand and recast themselves in the roles of a new generation of such tradition bearers. Furthermore, it is a concept that is closely related to the theories of ghosting, as articulated by theatre scholar Marvin Carlson in his book *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2001), in which Carlson argues that every theatrical production of a play is haunted by the ghosts of the entire production history of that same play, as well as the ghosts of the previous roles played by the actors. The memories of all previous productions haunt each new performance through a process which "presents the identical thing they may have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context" (7). This has been developed further more recently by Daniel Tyler in his (yet) unpublished doctoral thesis on *Contemporary Shakespeares* (2017) in which he writes of the ghosts of personal experiences and memories that actors and audiences also bring into the auditorium and play a pivotal role in the construction of meaning around individual performances.

³ This has been most regularly articulated by Taffy Thomas, a professional storyteller and former UK Storytelling Laureate and is based upon his discussions with Duncan Williamson and Betsy White, both Scots Travellers and traditional storytellers who exercised a considerable influence on the contemporary development of storytelling in the UK. Williamson regularly encouraged his listeners to retell his stories and to think of him whilst doing so. This, he claimed, was the route to true immortality.

It is this new complexity that Tyler introduces to the concept of theatrical ghosting that might usefully be applied now to storytelling. If we take this idea of any story being told in the presence of all previous tellers, we can develop this image of the crowded stage of ghost-storytellers to also fill a performance event with ghost-storytellings and an auditorium with ghost-audiences. In other words a storytelling performance can be something constructed from all previous tellings and all previous audiences and how those audiences have perceived and memorized the intricate and changing relationship between teller and tale. In these instances, of course, we are fundamentally understanding storytelling as an act of performance, indeed as an act of *theatre*, because we then must see storytelling as a live event in which the co-presence of teller and listener is an essential element⁴ and the theatrical event is ephemeral and “a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself” (Carlson, 2001, 2), leaving behind nothing but ghostly traces of itself in the form of memories and other documents, such as photographs, recordings, reviews and diary reflections. As Carlson says, “ghostly storytellers and recalled events are the common coin of theatre everywhere in the world at every period” (3).

The idea of performance in relation to the folktale is not new; folklorists have since the 1920s been interpreting folklore as *performance*, rather than text (see Bogatyrëv and Jakobson, 1982), and it is an approach that has become mainstream in folklore studies since the 1960s (see, for example, Bauman, 1984). Nevertheless, the use of *performance* by folklorists is not quite the same as how it is understood by theatre scholars and the two disciplines have developed entirely different sets of critical literatures that rarely speak to each other. At the risk of oversimplifying matters for the sake of my argument, in folklore ‘performance’, in relation to storytelling, is closely related to sociolinguistics and is seen as primarily a function of language. It is understood as a communicative frame with its own set of conventions and expectations and, whilst consisting of spoken, physical and gestural language within a spatial, social and temporal context, the emphasis remains on it as a tool for the

⁴ Notwithstanding forms of storytelling where co-presence is not fundamental, such as novel-writing, film-making, digital storytelling and so on.

interpreting of what is a verbal art with the verbal text at its core. Typically, the theatre scholar will be equally interested in the performance as a staged event, (what Bauman calls 'cultural performance') with all its associated aesthetics, techniques, devices, mechanics. And this, I argue, has a particular bearing in how we might approach the translation of folktale texts.

Translations

One of the significant cultural developments in relation to the performing arts in recent decades has been the emergence of a new kind of professional and semi-professional performer: the contemporary storyteller (see Heywood, 1998; Sobol, 1999; Wilson, 2006). A largely solo performer (occasionally working with other performing artists) the figure of the contemporary storyteller emerged from the countercultural and alternative theatre movement of the late 1960s and 1970s and by the 1980s had begun to assert itself as a regular feature in the cultural landscape. Storytelling has continued to grow and develop, boosted in the UK in the 80s and 90s through new opportunities for employment within the education system, in particular, as a result of the devolution of budgets away from local authorities to individual schools and changes in the National Curriculum⁵. That growth has continued on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond and storytelling has now earned its place as part of the general programming in public arts centres and festivals. Furthermore, a growing literature has emerged around what has been called the 'revival' of storytelling, which continues to be a contested term.

⁵ The introduction of Local Management in Schools in the UK and the specific mention of 'oracy' as a key skill in the National Curriculum, whilst at the same time downgrading the importance of Drama as a subject, led to a crisis in Theatre-in-Education and many companies were no longer able to survive. Storytellers benefitted by offering a much more economic model to Schools in a core part of the Curriculum, as it is, of course, much cheaper to hire one storyteller, than a whole company of actors and many TIE companies had previously been fully funded by the Local Education Authorities. This irony is not lost on the author.

In the UK, in particular, the repertoire of this new breed of storytellers has been drawn from the national and international collections of folktales and whilst some of those stories will have been learned by being passed on orally, either from other storytellers (there is a fair bit of sharing of repertoire that goes on, which is a common trait amongst different popular theatre forms) or genuine tradition bearers, such as the late Duncan Williamson (1928-2007), the image of the long line of ghost-storytellers passing on their stories by unfettered oral transmission is much more complicated. Most storytellers will have either directly or indirectly developed significant parts of their repertoire through research into the written archives.

Folklorists have displayed a degree of ambivalence towards the new breed of storytelling practitioner, on the one hand embracing them as enthusiasts for, and advocates of, traditional culture and practices, whilst on the other hand viewing them as interventionists into traditions they may not fully understand and, in doing so, raiding the vaults of traditional culture in order to repackage it into saleable commodities and altering (even damaging) those very same traditions.

Typically a storyteller is likely to turn to a written source for material in order to develop into a piece for performance and that source has a reasonable likelihood of being either a version first published by a nineteenth century folklorist and/or a translation of nineteenth century material. There are, of course, exceptions, but many of the folktale collections that are available to us have their origins in that period of almost frenetic folktale collecting in the nineteenth century, and especially in its second half. Individual storytellers will have different development and rehearsal processes and approach material in different ways, but in preparing the text for performance, the contemporary storyteller will rarely learn the printed tale by heart, but typically will change the words to their own idiom, update phrases, add asides and commentary, alter certain imagery, edit the story for racial or gender bias, and so on, whilst remaining true to the core of the story. The text is likely to remain fluid as an 'oral' story in the mind of the performer during this rehearsal period and even in the early instances of it being told in public, finally settling and achieving a degree of solidity and

stability over the course of multiple tellings. What they do effectively is render an *adaptation* of the tale suitable for their intended audience. One could argue, of course, that this is what storytellers have always done, that this is a close description of how oral transmission works in practice, albeit in a way that is slower and less consciously managed over a period of time. Nevertheless, this has not prevented storytellers from at times standing accused of cultural piracy and a lack of respect for the very traditions from which they are drawing. There is certainly a debate to be had around the ownership of traditional materials and the extent to which folktales (and especially translated folktales) are examples of colonial plunder, but there are many more people than contemporary storytellers who are implicated in that particular argument. Likewise I am sure that there are plenty of individual examples of both respectful and thoughtless behaviour towards traditional stories by storytellers, but much of this comes down to the thorny issues of authenticity and fidelity. *Fidelity*, in particular, is core to any discussion of translation and it is because of its problematic nature in relation to performance texts that I wish to argue for a fresh approach to the translation of folktales, not at the expense of other approaches, but as an additional legitimate way of approaching the folktale text. I wish to propose that the development of the contemporary storytelling movement has reminded us that we should approach these texts not simply as texts *of* performance, or indeed texts *as* performance, but also as texts *for* performance.

Fidelity

Perhaps a good starting point for my case is John Berger's short essay on translation, 'Self-Portrait', in which he says:

The conventional view of translation involves studying the words on one page in one language, then rendering them into another language on another page. This involves a so-called word-for-word translation, then an adaptation to respect and incorporate the linguistic tradition and rules of the second language, and finally another working-over to recreate the equivalent of the 'voice' of the original text. Many, perhaps most, translations follow this procedure and the results are worthy but second-rate.

Why? Because true translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written. True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal.

(...)

A spoken language is a body, a living creature, whose physiognomy is verbal and whose visceral functions are linguistic. And this creature's home is the inarticulate as well as the articulate.

(2016, 3-5)

Now, Berger is talking specifically about the translation of literary texts, but his sentiment will be music to the ears of storytellers and, indeed, theatre translators, because he challenges the ultimate authority of the written text for translation and, by implication that the translator's art is contingent upon the ever-present ghost (another ghost) of the writer and their text. Berger is challenging what he sees as the prevailing orthodoxy in translation, namely that the translator's primary function is one of fidelity *to the text*. Berger is arguing that there are other things to which the translator must remain faithful.

The idea of textual fidelity in the translation of folktales is particularly problematic and at the heart of that is the orthodox assumption that the folktale text is primarily a literary text. Historically there are very good reasons for that, not least of all because of the earlier technological limitations of making audio recordings, especially 'in the field', and also the desire to compare stories both within and across cultural boundaries, as a way of establishing folklore as a legitimate 'scientific' discipline. Whilst variations in texts are desirable for comparative work, these must remain within certain limitations and, most importantly, the texts under comparison must at least be stable. For Luzel, who was trying to establish the corpus of Breton folktales within a wider European context, the ability to compare stable texts was invaluable. And still today, the 'science' of comparative folklore, whereby individual stories are broken down into motifs and symbols and classified according to tale type, in order to compare different tale variants across geography and history, is an important and fascinating branch of the discipline. However, it demands a certain faith in the authority of the published text and for the translator of the folktale, one has to ask, to what exactly is one being expected to be faithful?

Luzel and his folktales

Let us return for a moment to the problem in hand – that is the translation of Luzel’s folktales. Luzel collected his folktales primarily in two contexts. A number of tales were collected within the context of his attending local *veillées*. Luzel was not necessarily an outsider to these events – he had grown up regularly attending *veillées*, some of which were held in his family house or that of his elder sister Catherine, and there is some evidence that at the *veillées* he attended as an adult and folktale collector, he occasionally contributed to the evening’s entertainment himself⁶. Other stories were collected in one-to-one engagements, where Luzel tracked down a particular storyteller in their own home or when he received visits himself from storytellers who had heard that he was keen to record their tales.

The actual recording of the tales was done in ‘real time’ with Luzel hastily scribbling down the words of the storyteller, occasionally interrupting to ask then for certain phrases to be repeated so that he can copy them down accurately. At the same time, however, Luzel argued that it was the structure and the content of the tale that assumed the utmost importance in terms of fidelity, rather than the words themselves, recognizing that language had a certain fluidity in telling and re-telling of stories. We can safely assume, then, that the ‘transcriptions’ that Luzel made were relatively accurate, but contained some degree of variation as to what was actually said.

The next thing to consider is the process whereby Luzel prepared the stories for publication. All of the stories Luzel collected were originally told to him in Breton and he published those stories mainly in French, sometimes in Breton⁷, and sometimes in both French and Breton with both texts side by side. After

⁶ Luzel’s sister, Perrine, also collected tales on her brother’s behalf, attending a series of *veillées* in a bakehouse in the town of Morlaix in 1890. The stories she collected were published as *Contes du Boulanger* (Luzel, 1995c) under her brother’s name.

⁷ This itself was a challenge to Luzel, as he rejected the artificial ‘Unified Breton’ form, preferring to write in a Breton that reflected the language as it was spoken. This meant working across different dialects and adopting a form that was understandable to Breton readers, whilst remaining relatively faithful to those spoken dialects.

compiling a text in Breton from his fieldwork notes, Luzel would produce a literal translation in French. He would then rewrite the French version in order to improve the text, correct any mistakes, clarify anything that was unclear, and 'improving' the style to render it more readable. He would then, if necessary, produce a modified Breton version to sit alongside the new French translation (1995a, 180-81). All of this may seem rather heavy handed to the modern collector of folktales, but these were standard practices in the nineteenth century and, in fact, Luzel exercised a lighter touch than many. Other folklorists, including the Grimms, would heavily edit texts to 'improve' (or censor) them, or bring together different variants of the same story into a single composite and definitive version of the tale. Luzel was also trying to balance a whole series of demands and interests, including objections from much of the Breton establishment for his rejection of Unified Breton and willingness to publish in French. At the same time, Luzel wanted to make the corpus of Breton folktales available to as wide a readership as possible, in order to promote Breton culture, and that meant publishing in French. Moreover, it meant publishing versions of the tales that sat well on the page – that is to say that they were readable as literary texts and would sell to the general public – as well as conforming to the 'scientific' principles of folktale scholarship of the time. In other words, Luzel underwent a whole series of negotiations and compromises in between his being told the story in Breton and his publishing it in French.

As previously stated, Luzel published the stories in many forms during his lifetime, but his major publication project was the commissioning of three volumes of *Contes populaires de Basse-Bretagne* by the Parisian publisher Maisonneuve et Charles Leclerc in 1887 and it is through these that his work became best known outside of his native Brittany. It was also the primary text that I used for translating the tales. However, given the editing processes described above, one has to ask what the authority of the source text is and whether fidelity to it is a desirable, or even possible thing, for the translator. In this instance the source text is already a translation and, moreover, an edited translation of a literal translation of a somewhat unreliable transcript of an oral

performance of a story. And that is before we even get into the business of all the other ghost-storytellers who are lined up behind Luzel's informant.

We are, therefore, fooling ourselves if we attach too much importance to Luzel's published text. The text may often be the only trace that remains of a storytelling event and yet we should be wary of treating it as sacred in any way, as we have no way of knowing the extent to which Luzel 'improved' the texts at the request of his publisher, or in order to better suit his own scholarly agenda, nor how closely the published tale related to what was actually spoken around the winter fireside. It is quite possible that elements of the tales that Luzel considered of paramount importance, and which he chose to emphasise and clarify, were of little consequence and entirely dispensable to the travelling beggarwoman who told him the story. All we can say is that the texts that Luzel published are Luzel's re-tellings of the stories, reflecting Luzel's tastes and priorities, suited to his audience/readership at that time. And by consequence, my translations are simply another set of re-tellings, reflecting my own – yet another link in chain. And, of course, it follows that each re-telling is just as unstable and unreliable as the next.

In this sense, therefore, I am simply casting the translator as a storyteller and the act of translation as another performance event. As Richard Schechner says, performance is a form of "restored behaviour" (1985, 36), a repetition of earlier performances, accompanied by "the inevitable slippage (that is present) in all repetitions" (Carlson, 2001, 4). Whilst the teller may have a duty to show a respect for the story, the idea of absolute fidelity is not a top priority. In fact, each teller has the duty to refashion the story for themselves and for each audience anew. This is certainly not to argue in favour of a cavalier attitude or a sloppiness to translation of folktale texts or to argue that accuracy is not important, but simply to recognize that part of the context for the translation of any folktales is to acknowledge them as texts for performance, texts that may (indeed should) be taken back off the page and re-performed. As David Johnston says:

It is now commonly accepted by those who translate drama that the translator has a responsibility for enabling the play to be reconcretized as a play rather than solely translating the words as text.
(2000, 85)

It is an approach that suggests that, if fidelity has any role to play, then it should be a fidelity to the audience, or the performative context, rather than to a written text.

Theatre Translation

With this in mind, we are coming towards the concept of the translator-as-actor or the transformation of “the translator into a cultural promoter or *metteur en scène*” (Bigliuzzi, Kofler and Ambrosi, 2013,) and, indeed, our understanding of the role of the translator of folktales might gain from the growing literature on stage translation. In her 1985 essay, ‘Ways Through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts’, Susan Bassnett-McGuire proposes that “all kinds of factors other than the linguistic are involved in the case of theatre texts” and “a theatre text exists in a dialectical relationship with the performance of the text” (87), yet acknowledges that at the time of her writing, the most common approach to the translation of a theatre text was simply to treat it “as if it were a literary work” (90), where fidelity to the original remained paramount. Instead Bassnett-McGuire (88) summons theatre semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan’s five categories of performative expression (the spoken text; bodily expression; the actor’s external appearance; the playing space; non-spoken sound)⁸ to argue for an approach to stage translation that foregrounds the full range of ways that meaning is constructed in the act of performance, claiming that “Acting conventions and audience expectations are components in the making of performance that are as significant as conventions of the written text” (92) and dismissing the notion of fidelity as “an impossible concept (...) [that] can only exist if the interpretative processes are not undertaken at all” (93).

⁸ One might likewise characterize theatrical performance as being an interplay between four primary dynamics: the physical; the vocal; the spatial; the temporal/durational.

What Bassnett-McGuire was proposing was not necessarily new (see, for example, Adrienne Mason's essay 'Molière Among the Penguins' (2013) for an account of John Wood's attempts to create 'playable' translations of Molière for Penguin Classics in the 1950s), but it is a clarion call that has been taken up by theatre translation scholars in developing a new set of theories and practices that takes the written text as simply one element "in a complex set of codes that interact together in performance" (94). As Terry Hale and Carole-Anne Upton note, "The concept of a literal translation of a play is as absurd as that of an 'authentic' production of Shakespeare" (2000, 10). In addition, one of the key notions in current thinking is that theatre translation is by its very notion a collaborative act, or as Kate Eaton proposes, "the outcome of a collaborative rehearsal process involving director, actors and translator" (2013, 172).

Unfinished Business

From this concept I would like to make three propositions. First, that the written text of any text for performance (translated or otherwise) is necessarily *incomplete*, and that it only achieves completion in the moment of performance, at which it vanishes and returns to its state of incompleteness, leaving behind only traces and footprints, until it is next performed. Second, if we are to apply this thinking to the translation of folktales, as texts for performance (as indeed the new context of contemporary storytelling performance has done), then it demands new translations that take into account the performative (indeed, theatrical) context and may sit alongside existing translations that serve the comparative folklorist well, but the storyteller-performer poorly. Thirdly, I would expand on Eaton's notion of a collaboration between translator, director and actors. Drawing on Carlson's theories of ghosting, folktale translation is a collaboration between translator, storyteller and the ghost-storytellers that haunt the text, as well as audiences and spaces, past and present – a collaboration between the dead and the living that recognizes the necessary fluidity and instability of the oral text.

In this spirit (no pun intended), my translations of Luzel are collaborations between myself, Luzel's Ghosts (including Luzel himself) and any storyteller who

wishes to take them off the page and into the liveness of a storytelling moment. I also offer them as texts that are incomplete. To use one last theatre analogy, they may be best thought of as a series of *scenarii*⁹, rather than texts or scripts, those rough sheets of paper that actors from the Italian *commedia dell' arte* would pin to the scenery to provide an outline structure, with key moments of action, of the play to be performed and around which the actors might improvise.

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⁹ The singular form, scenario, has of course entered the English language as a term meaning an outline narrative or a predicted series of events.

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