The Poet as Translator: The Poetic Vision of John Betjeman

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Abstract
Rainer Maria Rilke (1989) describes the quest of the poet as that of saying the “unsayable.” Similarly, poets like Ezra Pound and Octavio Paz suggest that when the poetic essence is beyond the words, then the poem enters the realm of the “untranslatable” and invites an act of translation. John Betjeman recognizes the complexity that is inherent to the heritage of the Modernist School which renders poetry to be as incomprehensible as any foreign language. This paper argues that Betjeman diverts from the stylistic density of the Modernist tradition because he discerns a similar unintelligibility in a receding English culture. Hence, translation becomes not only a vocation but an inevitability that looms large considering the social and political upheavals he witnessed. Drawing on Rilke and Paz’s understanding of the act of translation as seeking meaning “beyond the words per se” (Jackson, 2011), this paper explores Betjeman’s attempts to translate a condition which is both “unsayable” and foreign, which afflicted Englishness as a cultural locus.

Key words: John Betjeman; Translator; 20th Century British Poet; Modernism

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