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A Publisher's Vision

Knowing the work of translators to be meticulous, infinitely painstaking, and one of ceaseless and intense concentration, I very much like Anthea Bell's metaphor of the trapeze artist.¹ It is so much more apt than Pushkin's familiar description of translators as the carhorses of civilisation. In Pushkin's time the load of the translator was perhaps much heavier. Nowadays it is necessarily lighter for all but a few, and threatens to be lighter still.

When Manya Harari and Marjorie Villiers founded the Harvill Press in 1946 after working together on the Russian Desk in the Foreign Office during the war, they gave their reason for doing so as wanting to do what they could to restore the bridges that had been lost between cultures in World War Two. Ever since I read that declaration in their first catalogue, I have thought of translation houses as builders of bridges. Now I shall think of them as beneath, and in a remote way supporting, the translators above.

At Harvill I have tried to find a translator of seventy summers or more, scholars for whom high wires over the Niagara were a thing of the past. Why so senior? The translation of the mere language is presumably but a quarter of the work and the more experienced and more deeply read a translator is in the literature of the

source language—as well as aware of the day-to-day ways and social and political history—the more readily he or she will recognise the landscape of literary and quotidian memory behind the language, the invisible veins beneath the surface of a text.

Joan Tate, the exceptional ambassador for and tireless translator of a whole library of valuable books from Swedish, used to say that vocabulary was no more than a sixteenth part of translation. Guido Waldman, my colleague at Harvill, and himself a very good translator although only in his sixties, did not share all of my convictions about translators and was forever finding young, untried ones, and one after the other they won the best prizes. He favoured the school of the exact translation, but my preference remains to seek the best reflection of the text in English rather than to sacrifice a more felicitous rendering in English for the sake of being its mirror. We have had instances in which passages of French so florid as to incite merriment in a precise translation have been—with the author’s blessing, to be sure—made more plain.

Some authors enthusiastically collaborate in the translation process, and since a number of them have excellent English it has always been a pleasure to work with them at the stage of the editing of the translation. I think particularly of Cees Nooteboom working with the translations of Ina Rilke, and of Per Petterson working with the translations of Anne Born, and one cannot but cite in a category of his own the ardent attention which Max Sebald gave to his translations. “Give” is as regrettable as it is deliberate because the time that writers take upon their translations is unpaid and publishers, I am afraid, take that for granted. There does come a time, however, when the fame of a writer catches up with him/her in terms of the number of translations he or she has to deal with. They land irregularly, sometimes three books

behind the book the author is now writing, and sometimes four at a time, not necessarily in languages the author can easily read. By then the writer's freedom to devote his or her days, weeks even, to an English translation may simply have run out, and by then it must be hoped that he has a sufficient trust in his translator and his publisher's editors that he can leave his former part in the finalising of the English text to them—this in spite of how important in other parts of the publishing world the English text can be. It will rarely be used as a basis for further translation, but it is often a reference, or used as a means of reading, sometimes making a decision on a book, by publishers abroad.

It seems to me certainly desirable that a translator open a line to the author, and keep it always open. Whether it is a crucial line may depend on the level of the author's English, but I don't remember a single case in which the time taken to establish communication with an author was time wasted. On the other hand I remember many cases where a failure to do so has led to grief. One remembers too a strange virus that—mercifully rarely—afflicts translators: that the authors whose books they have admired without reservation at the beginning of the work become *bêtes noires*, sometimes detested. At times, but not always, this leads to a translator opting not to take on the author's next book. In an ideal world, an author will tell a publisher that the translator must never be replaced. A long association of the one's work with the other's is unquestionably valuable. Richard Ford once told me that he regarded his exchanges with his translators as sacred texts, and no-one doubts that a translator reads a work more closely, more passionately, and has the strongest desire for the new version of it to be a flawless text. I know of no author not consulted who has not been disappointed, and occasionally outraged, not to have been given the chance to make—perhaps—a book better in English even than it was in the original.

Harvill has been especially fortunate to have had authors who have gone to the length of learning English in order to be of use to their translators and to their British publisher. Claudio Magris knew (spoke) not a word of English when we published his *Danube*, and three years later he was dangerously fluent.² Bernardo Atxaga and Manuel Rivas are not far behind.

Translators, in my ideal world, play a considerable part in the promotion of their authors' works in English. Jonathan Dunne spent several weeks travelling with Manuel Rivas when the Galician novelist first came to England. They went round the country conducting informal seminars for audiences of the film of one of Rivas' stories. Some authors, of course, have no need of their however-so-gifted translators: Javier Marías and Cees Nooteboom reading brilliantly in the Queen Elizabeth Hall at the South Bank in London, that perennially valuable platform for European writers and poets; likewise Per Olov Enquist, Eduardo Mendoza, Andrey Kurkov, Henning Mankell—these writers have an advantage over those who have no or lesser English, and the translator can do much to limit their disadvantage, as Giovanni Pontiero did, interpreting for an entire group of Portuguese writers on a tour they made through England—and that only months before he died.

Translators may wonder (and sometimes even resent) what a publisher's editor does. The greater part of the editor's work is what in the film world is called "continuity;" or it is making purely factual corrections, getting street names correct, all manner of small things that presumably have escaped the notice of the original publisher. I make no claim for British publishers being more attentive than their European or American counterparts, but I have spent months of my working life doing the housework left undone by foreign editors. In one case an editor at Harvill

spent months checking and repairing the accuracy of a beautifully written (also bestselling in its original language) work of history.

It is necessary at the outset to establish a guideline as to what is a tolerable degree of naturalisation. Harvill has favoured over the years leaving as much detail as possible in the original context and terminologies. There are many words of foreign slang about which it makes sense to agree a strategy before a translation begins. Some of these can go directly into American and some cannot. American translations we have always edited back into English so that Prague be not paved with sidewalks, so that the floor numbers in European buildings are appropriate to the country. Michael Henry Heim once made a case at a British Centre for Literary Translation seminar for mid-Atlantic translations. In the day of texts on Word files this deliberate watering down of both American and English is no longer necessary and certainly not ideal. American editors can make the parallel changes in the other direction.

Each publisher has a house style, which is not imposed on authors writing in English—nor would we alter an American author's spelling (though we have habitually revised their punctuation), but it helps translators to have a note of a publisher's idiosyncracies (Harvill, for example, uses a hyphen in no-one). Translators into English are almost always dealing with editors on both sides of the Atlantic and should insist on a list of all of those idiosyncracies before they begin, with a view to being able to deliver an American text to the American editor and an English one to the British editor.

The first translation I commissioned, in 1978, was of Henrik Tikkanen's *Snobs' Island*.³ Mary Sandbach, the doyenne of Swedish translators, already in her eighties, came to Chatto & Windus' offices with a problem. There are six words for fucking in Swedish, she advised, but only one in English. What do I do about that? If I

was startled then—and not only at the imbalance—I am by now the more surprised after years in the interim of watching Scandinavian languages grow, so to speak, as they arrive into English. This remains the oddest conundrum among the many that twenty-five years of working with translators has thrown up. And in all of that time I have watched translators struggle against the more serious glaciers of the almost untranslatable.

Are some texts untranslatable? Russian poetry is very often held by Russians to be beyond translation. Is it yet worth the attempt? I would always say yes, but Joseph Brodsky—on an evening organised by Bill Swainson in the Queen Elizabeth Hall filled to the rafters, to mark the centenary of Osip Mandlestam's birth—greeted every poem read (beautifully) in English by Seamus Heaney with the vigorous assertion that it was not, and then declaimed the originals. The translator, who had come from California for the event, chose not to go to the celebratory dinner.

Three translations in recent years at Harvill have been quarrelled with that I remember, and one or two others have been sniped at by reviewers. One translation was disavowed by the author, who, had there been an appropriate communication with the translator, would certainly have mended what were judged infelicities or errors. One was of the Brazilian novelist Ana Miranda's *Bay of All Saints and Every Conceivable Sin* by Giovanni Pontiero, a text in English which was occasionally accused of having erred in tone.⁴ It is a long book that must have been a vast struggle to render into English at a consistent tension and which did manage to read beautifully in English throughout. My belief is now that the translator had made a decision as to how, in terms of tone, he would convey the spirit and the music of the original, and was criticised for all the grace-notes his choice required him to discard. Pontiero won the first Independent Foreign Fiction Award with José Saramago for his translation of

The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis, a work which he magnificently championed.⁵ He also, with Saramago's insistent blessing, recreated a translation that had been savaged by an American editor and published in that flawed form.

The English and American translations of *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (called *Smilla's Sense of Snow* in the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition) have many differences.⁶ Tiina Nunnally, the American translator and herself a winner of the Independent Foreign Fiction Award with Per Olov Enquist's *The Visit of the Royal Physician*,⁷ as of other notable awards, took a view about Peter Høeg's deliberate stylistic complexities, polishing away many express awkwardnesses which the Danish publisher and the author worked long and hard to restore in the Harvill edition (which sold more than a million copies). The variations have only been remarked in two essays on translation practice and hardly anyone has wondered at the decision of the American publisher to drop the essential "Miss" from the title. Nothing to do with translation theory, apparently, only a sensible way of not having (feminist) bricks through your (14th floor) windows. Miss Smilla would have had something to say about that too.

In the twenty years that I was publisher at Harvill we put out in our trade paperback series, which was the principal vehicle for translations, more than three hundred titles, some of which were revived from the backlist. The majority of them were new books found for the most part in Europe and the Far East, only a few from Latin America, a very few from North Africa and the Middle East, only the novels of Yashar Kemal from Turkey, and one memorable autobiography of the Tibetan monk Palden Gyatso. There have been, in continuation of the work done by Manya Harari, herself a Russian, a great many translations from Russian, both reissued from the backlist and in the 1980s and 1990s from the last generation of the suppressed writers.

Until Eric Dickens began to translate from Estonian we published Jaan Kross in translation from the Finnish, and we translate Ismail Kadare (save once) from the French texts of his Albanian originals. In all we made translations from thirty-four languages.

In Europe very substantial sales of translated books are common and the pattern generally favours an author's whole oeuvre and not simply one book, as is the English tendency. The Swedish author Henning Mankell was regularly selling copies of his crime novels in the high hundreds of thousands in Germany before he was published in Britain (and he still does). Fred Vargas, a French crime writer of real distinction, was selling more than half a million copies of her books in France before she was translated into English. Crime fiction translated into English is a category which at present grows, which most evidently opens windows into worlds abroad, and which also deserves the attention of very good translators.

As to the literature of the languages no-one in Harvill could read: a body of readers have over time been attached, coerced or cheerfully dragooned to the service of the house, readers whose knowledge of the literature of those languages was profound and who were aware of what Harvill stood for. Unsurprisingly, our authors are among our best readers. It was my hope, whencesoever they came, that all the authors would—as Octavio Paz in fact did on his last visit to London—think of their British publishing house as a refectory table to which they and their translators belonged, at which they would recognise and esteem their companions while not always agreeing with all of them.

José Saramago's wife Pilar, along with a Spanish book club editor, was the first to persuade Harvill to publish Manuel Rivas. Many but by no means all of those readers were translators, but to Ellen Elias-Bursac (David Albahari), to David Bellos

(Georges Perec), to Margaret Jull Costa (several), to George Bird (Andrey Kurkov), to Robert Chandler (Andrey Platonov), to the novelist James Buchan (Golshiri's *The Prince* to be published in the autumn of 2005), and to John Crowfoot (Emma Gerstein) Harvill owes the impetus to have acquired some of their best authors. Roger Straus typically rejoiced to tell the story of the advice he had from Susan Sontag, his long-time author and counsellor, who had warmly commended that he publish both Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Salvatore Satta's *The Day of Judgment*.⁸ Yes, he said, but if I had space only for one? Satta, she told him, and in my view rightly.

In recent years the best of the readers inside Harvill have been Guido Waldman and Euan Cameron, translators both. Before them, Harry Willetts famously read for Harvill in fourteen languages. He once sent back a book after some months, regretting that he had not after all had the necessary time—not the time to read the book, it turned out, but the time to learn the language, which was Danish. Willetts was the favoured translator of Solzhenitsyn, and when invited by the author to retranslate *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* he said that it would be a privilege to make what could nevertheless only be the second best translation of the work.⁹ The best—unmatchably, he said—was the Welsh.

A publishing house has to stand for something, be recognisable to its readers, the collectors of its books, to its potential authors and of course to booksellers, to other publishers and agents. And you have to go on striving to burnish that for which you stand, to be known only for what is excellent—as Faber's poetry list is. In an article in the *Daily Telegraph* recently on translation I was misquoted in every instance save in having said that in looking for authors and translators it is as simple as this: that you publish only Beethoven and ask only Schnabel to translate. By the

same token, what you do not publish is as important as what you do. When you are willing to consider books from a great many languages it is of inestimable value to be able to depend upon the discreet wisdom of your own authors and translators, your regular correspondents the publishers and critics in Europe, the best readers in all the languages you need.

Famously, and no-one who discusses the business of translating fiction forgets them, some translated novels have become huge bestsellers: *The Name of the Rose*, Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*, Peter Høeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, and to a lesser extent Haruki Murakami novels—his *Norwegian Wood* sold several millions of copies in Japan—Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Georges Perec's *Life A User's Manual*.¹⁰ Many Italian authors who would otherwise not have been published here followed Lampedusa and then years later Umberto Eco through the narrow gate into English, as Danish authors did in Peter Høeg's wake. The big bestsellers go on being rarities, but at the same time they remain the beacons and inspiration of translation houses—as also wearisome pegs upon which other publishers' marketing departments hang all manner of books, as in “a cross between Miss Smilla and Jackie Collins...” A cross indeed.

Harvill made a virtue of the fact that the majority of their books were translations, and for me it was an astonishment to hear Carmen Callil, one of the best publishers of her generation besides being the founder of Virago, say in public that she would never put a translator's name on the cover of a book. In the same speech she said she would have told Solzhenitsyn that unless he changed his name—to something simpler to pronounce—she would not have published him in Britain!

The inclination in Britain to be curious about other cultures or to learn languages has been pared away in schools by new curricula, and by the growth of

English as a second language the world over. What seems to me likely to happen in the short term is that the devoted publishers of other literatures will be driven back into a kind of cultural ghetto from which the irreducible readership for foreign literature in English will be able to order what they need from the internet and from a handful of real bookshops. The occasional runaway bestseller will emerge into the chain bookshops, but for the most part now the majority of even the finest books that are translated find their way to sales of between 1,500 and 6,000.

A healthier climate for the sales of translated literature would depend upon the willingness and freedom of the managers of chain bookshops to stock the works of European writers, the willingness too to display them on their prominent tables and in their windows without demanding a premium (all this held true barely six years ago). Not so very long ago Tim Waterstone, the C.E.O. of his bookshop chain, and Terry Maher, the C.E.O. of the rival Dillons chain, both demanded of their managers that they stock and actively sell *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. Not so very long ago, but impossible to imagine happening today. An improved climate will also need the persistent attention of literary editors and their best reviewers.

One long-serving literary editor once gave this response to my wife's question for a research paper for the French Ministry of Culture: "I do not feel that it is a part of my job to inform the readers of the *Daily Telegraph* about books translated from French...." The *Guardian* books pages have never been more extensive than they are now, the *Independent* and the *T.L.S.* are excellent and, if not from the point of view of translated literature, the *Spectator* and the *Sunday Telegraph* in their differing manners are admirable (this is a condition that comes and goes).

In the initial launching of a translated writer, literary editors can make the whole difference. On the one hand the immediate reviews and success of Claudio

Magris' *Danube* gave that book and that author's subsequent work a significant start in this country. On the other hand, the failure of the English press to review the first edition of W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* was as baffling as it was shameful.¹¹ That book sold, after a slow start, because other authors, having found their own way to it, claimed it as their book of the year. The *Times* steadfastly refused to accept a review from one of their leading critics. A. S. Byatt, Julia Neuberger and Anita Brookner were among those writers whose belief in the book led to the beginnings of an immense and deserved literary reputation and a considerable commercial success.

As to reviewers and translations: Gabriel Jospovici, in a long and carping discussion of the translation of *Life A User's Manual* managed to criticise David Bellos for the "translation" of all of the direct quotations from James Joyce that were hidden in the text. Too many reviewers take similar pains to be just that much cleverer than the translator. Anthea Bell says that "if reviewers don't comment on a translation, it has worked."¹² Although reviewers almost invariably comment favourably on Ms Bell's translations, I do not hold reviewers in general to be good judges of a translation. I would rather that more of them took the trouble (were they able) really to study the original text beside the translation before they made any such judgment.

In the years before, during and after the war there came to England André Deutsch, Leopold Ullstein, Fred Warburg, George Weidenfeld—Manya Harari too—and other graduates, as one might think of them, of educational systems that recognised and cultivated an intelligentsia. It was as true of post-war America, where perhaps the most famous of the immigrant publishers were Helen and Kurt Wolff (who had been Kafka's wise and generous publisher in Germany). These great figures, often working together across the Atlantic (for example, Harvill shared with

the Wolffs the work of Pasternak and Lampedusa's *The Leopard*),¹³ kept alive, for as long as their houses survived, the working assumption that what was written in other languages should be taken as seriously as anything written in English. It is hard to imagine that any one of these publishers would have rejected a book as being "too French," "too German," "too Russian," as happens now only too often to European publishers when they offer a book outside a very small circle of British or American publishers, among them Drenka Willen at Harcourt, the successor to Helen Wolff, and two translator publishers: Jonathan Galassi of Farrar, Straus and Carol Janeway of Knopf. Nor, among the independent small houses should the Dalkey Archive Press, New Directions, or Seven Stories be overlooked.

The experience of English or American publishers offering their books to Europeans is strikingly different. The appetite of German and Dutch houses is astonishing; the proportion of Sweden and Finland's publications that are translations of American and English authors must be held alarming. There is, it seems, and in other European countries, an almost toxic dependence on Anglo-Saxon commercial fiction.

The bridges that the founders of the Harvill Press set out to rebuild seem not to be in such good repair today. Between all the other cultures and languages in Europe the lines are by contrast strong, but if only three per cent of the books published in Britain each year are translations, compared to c.26% in France—and that includes all the kinds of books, children's books, cookery books, etc. and academic texts, as well as literature—you can take the view that Britain is deliberately absenting itself from European literary cultures, or you could take the view that within that wretched three per cent are the very best books that Europe (and all the other languages of the world) has to offer. It may also follow that the publishing house that devotes itself to

translations—however excellent their authors and their translators—will not, unless there is a sea change, flourish. Yet it obviously matters immeasurably to British cultural life that translations be made of the best books of world literature—not only new ones but retranslations of classics—and that there be stimulated, in the first place by government, a climate within which translated literature will thrive.

Notes

¹ See this issue, Anthea Bell, “Translation as Illusion.”

² Claudio Magris, *Danube*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Collins Harvill, 1989).

³ Henrik Tikkanen, *Snobs’ Island*, trans. Mary Sandbach (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980).

⁴ Ana Miranda, *Bay of All Saints and Every Conceivable Sin*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (London: Collins Harvill, 1991).

⁵ José Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (London: Harvill, 1992).

⁶ Peter Høeg, *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*, trans. F. David (London: Collins Harvill, 1993); Peter Høeg, *Smilla’s Sense of Snow*, trans. Tiina Nunnally (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993).

⁷ Per Olov Enquist, *The Visit of the Royal Physician*, trans. Tiina Nunnally (London: Harvill, 2002).

⁸ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983);

Salvatore Satta, *The Day of Judgment*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Collins Harvill, 1987).

⁹ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. Harry Willets (London: Collins Harvill, 1990).

¹⁰ Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie’s World*, trans. Paulette Møller (London: Phoenix, 1995); Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, trans. Jay Rubin (London: Harvill, 2000); Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber, 1984); Georges Perec, *Life A User’s Manual*, trans. David Bellos (London: Collins Harvill, 1987).

¹¹ W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1996).

¹² Bell.

¹³ Giuseppe Tommasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun (London: Harvill, 1960).