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Translation as Illusion¹

I have to admit that I sit here feeling that I am a fraud on several counts; indeed, not just feeling it: I *am* a fraud. I have never studied the theory of translation—not, of course, that that has prevented me from forming theories of my own, but they have derived from practice rather than academic discipline, for the simple reason that translation studies didn't exist when I was an undergraduate. I might not have made a beeline for them anyway, since I never intended to be a translator and became one by pure accident, and my degree isn't even in modern languages but in English. There was a course here at Oxford where you could study the history of the development of the language, and that was what I wanted to do. In this course Milton was the cut-off line for literature, but that was all right, since I would be reading later English and American literature for pleasure anyway (and in the same way, naturally, I went on reading French and German books), but here was my one chance to study a highly non-vocational subject just for the fun of it. Charles Clarke, our present minister of education who is on record as considering even mediaeval history a useless discipline, would not have approved of Course 2 in the English degree at Oxford in my time.

But the chief reason for my fraudulence in opening this conference is that when Brenda Garvey kindly asked me to give the opening paper today, and sent me

the conference's statement of intent concerning the visibility of the act of translation, I had to say I couldn't do it because I didn't agree with the proposition.² I might as well tell you at once that in any debate between visible and invisible translation I am an unrepentant, unreconstructed adherent of the school of invisible translation, and I cannot change an honestly held opinion because it is out of fashion. I have called these remarks "Translation as Illusion" because, all my professional life, I have felt that translators are in the business of spinning an illusion: the illusion is that the reader is reading not a translation but the real thing. Of course this is an impossible ideal to achieve. I have two large panes of glass at the bottom of the window above the desk where I work; one has little distorting flaws in it, the other, probably a modern replacement, allows an undistorted view of the garden beyond. In presenting a foreign text in English I would wish to be like that perfectly transparent pane of glass, but I'm well aware that the slightly distorting pane is probably the one I resemble. In the many descriptions of their craft that practising translators give, metaphors and similes are prominent: Michael Frayn has described translation as being like acting, and when I mentioned his simile in a translators' panel last year, Adriana Hunter said that exactly the same thing had occurred to her: she feels that she is giving an English voice to the French authors she translates so well. The difference, we agreed, is that unlike an actor or director, a translator does not have the licence to offer a way-out, provocatively new interpretation of a text. But ours is still, like acting, an interpretative craft. I also like Willis Barnstone's definition of translation in his *The Poetics of Translation*: "Translation tends to be a certain kind of reading, an 'intensive reading' of the original text."³ I know one Dutch translator who prefers not to have read a book she is asked to translate before she starts work—though how she can know she will wish to translate it without reading it I'm not sure—but she

certainly hopes to get that pleasure of intensive reading from her work as she goes along. Furthermore, I cannot resist quoting Umberto Eco, in his recent *Mouse or Rat?* which I guess most of us here will have read: “It seems to me,” he says, “that the idea of translation as a process of negotiation (between author and text, between author and readers, as well as between the structure of two languages and the encyclopaedias of two cultures) is the only one that matches our experience.”⁴ This struck a chord in me and I am sure many other translators: Eco goes on in his next chapter to give an account of losses and gains, rewritings and compensations, which does indeed match the translator’s own experience very closely.

However, to return to my preference for invisible translation, you may think it deplorable from an academic and theoretical viewpoint, but perhaps I can bridge the theoretical gap by saying that *in practice* I don’t think there is much difference between the results produced by self-confessed invisible translators like me, and the proponents of the school of visible translation. A good translator will produce a good translation. I had the pleasure recently of introducing my friend Jean Boase-Beier’s fine translations of the mid-twentieth century German poet Ernst Meister.⁵ She is general editor of a whole series of translations called Visible Poets; as translator of this volume, however, she could not very well introduce it in the same way as she had introduced the others, so I had that privilege. Her renderings of the poems are excellent, and I admired them all the more because serious poetry translation is something I don’t myself do: I can translate comic verse, or light verse, or deliberately bad verse such as the effusions of the literary tom cat in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Life and Opinions of the Tom Cat Murr*,⁶ as we called it in English, but not the real stuff. Jean can, and I would have been tempted to say that her beautiful versions could have

been written in English in the first place if I hadn't feared it might be taken the wrong way.

In suggesting that to create an illusion is part of the translator's job I'm not saying, of course, that I think readers should be deprived of the foreign element in a translated text, far from it—only that I like a translation to read as easily as if it had been originally written in English. I will add, in my own defence, that I am not alone in that view: I was fortunate enough to be awarded the Schlegel-Tieck prize for translation from the German last year, for Karen Duve's novel *Regenroman*,⁷ in English *Rain*, and the judges' citation said that they thought, of the various works of fiction entered, this was the one that read most like an English novel. They did not mean that it appeared to be similar to something set in London or the Home Counties, say, since its specific background is the underworld of Hamburg and a dismal and extremely damp rural district of former East Germany.

But to return to this conference's statement of intent, the point with which I would really take issue is the idea that the reader should be *made* to confront the otherness of the foreign culture. The fact is, there are commercial considerations to be taken into account; many of my best friends are publishers, and I have every sympathy with a publisher's desire not to lose too much money on a book. I imagine, too, that translated authors would like their books to sell, and won't mind at all if they read naturally in English. It does not appear to me conducive to this aim to *make* readers confront the otherness of the foreign culture. I would hope, rather, to seduce them into enjoying and appreciating a book in translation as much as if they could read it in the original, without placing too many obstacles in the way of that enjoyment. Then they may even actively want to read the author's next book in

translation. I hope I am not entirely a Philistine, but I see the point of good entertainment as well as high literature, and many of us are happy to translate both.

We are looking today not at the process but at the product of translation. However, as the product is the outcome of the process I don't know that I can entirely keep off that subject. Very briefly, then, a translator has very often also acted as the publisher's reader for a book—not always, but very frequently. In terms of wordage, I must have written about the equivalent of five full-length novels in reports for publishers in my time. To a great extent, publishers have to rely on the judgement of their readers, and a reader really needs to feel very enthusiastic about a book before recommending it, knowing that the publishers are taking a risk. As a reader, you are asking them to put their money where your mouth is. Coleridge says somewhere that we tend to overvalue a book read in a foreign language because we are secretly proud of being able to read it at all. Not if we are reading for publishers, we don't. Because of the notorious disproportion of literature translated into and out of English, publishers and their readers need to feel sure that a foreign book is worth the extra trouble and expense of translation.

This brings me to the first of the two questions asked in the statement of intent—and again, I can look at them only from a practical as opposed to a theoretical viewpoint. What is the role of the translated text in Britain today? (We might say in the English-speaking world as a whole, because it is very frequent for the same translation to be published on both sides of the Atlantic, with a greater or lesser degree of americanization or, if it has passed the other way, of anglicization.) I could say simply, though I realise this is a wilful misunderstanding of the question, that its role is small—in much the same spirit as the comment of the late Madame Jeanne Calment, the Frenchwoman who lived to the age of over a hundred and twenty, who

when asked in a television interview how she saw the future replied, “As very short.” We all know that by comparison with other languages, the role of translated literature in English *is* very small. One ought to be able to say that the classics of past centuries are the exception, but even here, the recent Big Read television series contained only *War and Peace* in the final twenty-one books. I suppose the British reluctance to learn foreign languages is one of the reasons why so comparatively few translations are published. I’ve just been reading Boris Akunin’s *The Winter Queen*, in its excellent translation by Andrew Bromfield,⁸ and I found that every tiny scrap of French and a few scraps of German were translated in footnotes, which I suspect is symptomatic of the present dire state of modern-language teaching in this country. By comparison, the well-educated Germans seldom bother to translate their quotations from English. In a German reading copy of a Dutch book, I was interested to see that translations into German of Dutch quotations of poetry were given, but not of English quotations. Similarly, a century ago Freud assumed that the readers of his German texts would understand his French quotations, but in the recently published re-translations of those works in the New Penguin Freud series it was thought advisable to add English translations of the French passages.

All the same, I am happy to say that I do think the market for translations is definitely growing. Perhaps our minds are genuinely opening up—to the literature of other European countries at least; translations from other European languages far outweigh others although of course there are some fine translations of books from languages further afield, such as Japanese and Arabic. There are initiatives that have helped, such as the excellent Independent Foreign Fiction prize, which gives a very high profile to books from other languages. English PEN, too, has just acquired financial backing to set up a committee aiming to promote translations in the spirit of

PEN's other activities. (As I look back at this paper in the autumn of 2004, the first book to receive backing from PEN under this scheme is Anna Politkovskaya's *Putin's Russia*, translated by Arch Tait and published by Harvill.)⁹

I also see other developments which are very cheering: the statement of intent mentions instances of genre-specific reception, including detective fiction, of which the Russian novel I've just mentioned is an example. Only a few years ago, if we were offered a thriller for inclusion in *new books in german*, a twice-yearly journal which aims to interest publishers in new books from the German-speaking countries, we members of the editorial committee automatically reacted by saying that in view of the strong tradition of crime fiction already existing in English it didn't stand a chance. But the attitude has changed. Harvill have had a great deal to do with this, with their strong list including such writers as Henning Mankell. Meanwhile, Bitter Lemon Press has recently been founded with the express intention of publishing good European crime fiction in English translation.

And although I would mildly quarrel with calling children's literature genre-specific, because children, like adults, read books in all sorts of genres, I do definitely see an increasing willingness in English-language publishers to look at foreign children's literature and even publish some of it. This is one of my hobbyhorses, for if we assume that one aspect of the role of translated literature is to broaden the mind, then to encounter it in childhood is surely very valuable. Only the tiny minority of bilingual children will be able to read the best of foreign children's literature while they are at the ideal age for it, so there is a real and practical need for translation here. Dr Johnson, when asked what books he would give a boy to read first, said with great common sense: "I am always for getting a boy forward in his learning; for that is a sure good. I would let him at first read *any* English book which happens to engage his

attention; because you have done a great deal when you have brought him to have entertainment from a book. He'll get better books afterwards." We may forgive Johnson, in his period, for specifying boys only; by better books, I suspect he meant the Greek and Latin literature that an educated person of his time would read. The equivalent today might be the major classics of modern literature from at least other European languages. And how better to make young people receptive to those classics than by introducing them to books from other countries while they are still young?

I have been fortunate enough to be awarded the Austrian State Prize for Literary Translation for 2003, and was particularly pleased to hear from the President of IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People, that he regarded the award as a recognition of translated children's literature. As it happens the specifically Austrian books I have translated include a number of other titles, one in the New Penguin Freud series, two novellas by Stefan Zweig, a long and ingenious novel by Lilian Faschinger, but I am very happy to be thought of as a translator of children's books, for the reasons I have just mentioned. It is encouraging to realise that I have probably translated more of them in the last two or three years than for the two preceding decades.

So let me give my short answer to Question A: the role of the translated text is to expand experience, broaden the mind, and obviously to give access to literature that one could not otherwise read. To my great regret, I know no Slavonic languages, but would be sorry to have had no chance of reading the great Russian novelists in translation.

As for Question B, how does the role of the translated text differ from the role of the English-language text? Well, as I have indicated, in my opinion it ought not to differ in readability, only in offering an extra dimension of experience. There are, of

course, misconceptions about translation in general: only recently I had passed on to me a kindly meant comment from the proofreader of a story I had translated, to the effect that the dialogue rang remarkably well, “especially considering it was a translation.” And I felt slightly miffed when the *Times* reviewer of Cornelia Funke’s magic fantasy for young people, *Inkheart*,¹⁰ commented that the story lacked humour “unless it has been lost in translation:” she had not, presumably, read the original to see whether it was meant to be funny, and it isn’t; it’s an action-packed narrative adventure. But people do get fixed ideas about translations, and indeed about national stereotypes. A *Guardian* journalist, in an interview, asked Cornelia Funke “How does a German manage not to write about the Holocaust?” Any German author, writing on any subject? Cornelia, only in her early forties, was obviously not around at the time of the Third Reich.

I myself am on a little personal crusade at the moment to explode the erroneous belief that the Germans have no sense of humour. I am happy to say that at the 2003 presentation of the various translation prizes, which is preceded by readings from the winning books, the *only* passages to get a laugh were from German: David Constantine, who won the revived poetry translation prize, read from his brilliant translation of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Lighter than Air*,¹¹ while I contributed a passage from Karen Duve’s novel *Rain*, already mentioned, a black but entertaining piece of *grand guignol*. The extracts from other languages—French, Swedish, Spanish, Dutch—were excellent, but not strong on laughs.

Translating humour, indeed, often calls for extra effort in the spinning of illusions. Asterix the Gaul is an instance in point.¹² Wordplay, jokes and comic names combined with the visual element present special problems. The latest album is a collection of little stories written and drawn for various occasions, some while René

Goscinny was still alive. I used to take one of these stories about to translation workshops: it had been published in an album in France, but never translated into English, and I asked one set of postgraduate students on an MA course in translation how they would render one line, *y a plus de saison!* I was answered at once by a proudly beaming young man who gave me the *meaning* of the French, but did not offer any translation to fit the context—a battle between the little allegorical figures of winter and spring—and didn't seem to feel that anything more than the sense of the French was necessary. What you had to translate, transfer, carry across (in the literal sense) is the joke here. I have been absolutely amazed to find that some people—perfectly intelligent and well-educated people—didn't actually realise that *Astérix* was translated from French. I remember one secondary school headmistress, who said she'd had no idea that it was not originally in English. You'd have thought it had THIS IS FRENCH written all over it, and indeed for that very reason it was only ten years after the publication of the first French albums that an English publisher was brave enough to venture on the series, after several other firms had said it was too specifically French ever to cross the Channel. In my view it's European in general, but that's another story.

Difficulty is in fact welcome. It was a challenge and a great pleasure to translate the late Max Sebald's *Austerlitz*,¹³ trying to retain something of the flavour of his classical German style. In translating Max one rediscovers the pleasures of the long sentence and the subordinate clause. I have greatly enjoyed translating two novellas by Stefan Zweig for Pushkin Press. When I mentioned one of them to my Danish daughter-in-law she drew a sharp breath and said, "Oh, difficult!"—and he is; on the surface all appears limpid, but he really makes a translator think about every term, every word, every sentence.

I am at the moment faced with a very intriguing commission: the translation of a French novel by Gilles Rozier¹⁴ set in occupied France in the war; the name and more significantly the sex of the first-person narrator is never actually made explicitly clear, and while that narrator marries someone called Claude—a very convenient unisex name in French—Claude’s sex is never explicitly mentioned either. We are told of the wedding that “the bride wore white, the bridegroom a morning suit,” but not who was bride and who was groom. It is in fact obvious from the context and period that the narrator, a French teacher of German, is a gay man who has never understood his inclinations until he saves a young Polish Jew from the occupying forces and the Vichy authorities and hides him in the cellar of the family home for two years, during the course of which the narrator and the Pole fall in love. The narrator does not consummate the marriage with Claude, sitting up all night with a book instead. The tease is kept up throughout: there is never any *elle* pronoun for Claude, and of course in French the possessive *son, sa, ses* agrees in gender with the object possessed and not the person possessing it. *Son père, sa mère*, his or her father, his or her mother. The German translator of the book Claudia Steinitz, whom I know, has had the same problem as I have in English: the possessive works the other way, agreeing in gender as well as number with the person or persons doing the possessing. (As I return to this paper later in 2004, having completed the translation, I can add that it took some ingenuity and I had to be very free here and there, but in our respective languages of translation I think Claudia and I have brought it off. I kept telling myself that if Gilbert Adair could translate Georges Perec’s novel without the letter ‘e’—*La Disparition*, in English *A Void*—then anything was possible.)¹⁵

It is also the role of the translated text to be completely literate, and the translator needs to be able to write in a number of different styles. This is where

illusion again comes in. You may think the need for a translator to be able to write good English was self-evident, but not always. And there is the question of what to do when the author's style is not, frankly, very good. This seldom arises, but for reasons of historical interest it can happen that a book not intrinsically of great distinction is translated. The late Ralph Manheim translated *Mein Kampf*. Someone had to do it, and who better, although his widow has told me that having to get inside Hitler's mind did sometimes depress him. In a manner not quite comparable, but along the same lines, I recently translated the memoirs of Hitler's youngest secretary Traudl Junge who was in the Berlin bunker at the end of the war, edited by Melissa Müller.¹⁶ I agreed to take the translation on with some hesitation, because of Junge's cliché-ridden style. Melissa herself, having persuaded her, by then an old lady, to let her full memoir be published, told me she was rather taken aback by the naïveté of the writing. Junge described herself repeatedly, for instance, as being a captive in a gilded cage, and mentioned a colleague with "a laugh like little silver bells." I couldn't remove those characteristic phrases, but where she was particularly repetitive, and two words were available in English where she had used one over and over again in German, I did feel it was fair to vary it. I was immensely relieved when the book received a long review in the *Observer*, calling Junge "the Dorothy Wordsworth of the Third Reich."

Nor is the translator's task by any means done when the translation is delivered; sometimes—I hasten to say not always, but with increasing frequency—he or she must face what I have come to think of as the Curse of the Copy Editor. I repeat that the curse doesn't always strike; a book by Norbert Gstrein that I translated for Harvill was particularly well copy-edited, and the author himself also contributed some valuable suggestions. The Penguin group and the Orion group have excellent

copy editors, both in-house and freelance, people who raise the right questions and, in bringing a fresh eye to the text, make a really valuable contribution. But I have encountered some copy editors who seem to believe it their business to change wording for the mere sake of change—from “at last” to “eventually,” for instance—and to add bad grammar and unusual punctuation. When, in a novel based on the real-life memories of Eva Braun’s cousin¹⁷, I found that the copy editor had changed a phrase, “as my hairstyle suggested,” to “as my hairstyle inferred,” I had to write a note to the effect that a hairstyle was not a sentient being and could not infer anything; she was probably aiming for “implied.” At least this attempted change immediately alerted me to the necessity for watching every mark she had made, sometimes obviously for the sake of change. There seems to be a copy editor’s law saying that while the sea has a shore, a river has banks, and a lake can usually have either a shore or banks, whichever of those two words a translator has used for the land on the edge of a lake must be changed. You cannot second-guess the copy editor on that one. In this case, when my “banks” were changed to “shore,” I had in fact found a picture and description of the lake where Eva Braun and her cousin went swimming, which is almost entirely surrounded by steep rocks descending nearly vertically to the water, not by any stretch of the imagination a shore.

I had thought that this kind of extensive copy-editing was perhaps the result of a copy editor’s assuming that translators may be conversant with the source language of a text, but will require the services of someone who probably has a brand-new university degree in English to knock the translation into shape. But no, evidently it is not confined to translated texts. In the most recent issue of *The Author* (Spring 2004) Jane Aiken Hodge published a letter by her sister and fellow author, the late Joan Aiken, protesting about the extensive changes made to wording that she had carefully

considered already. This letter has struck a chord with many of us, the journalist and biographer Valerie Grove quoting it with feeling in one of the quality newspapers only a week or so ago. I will add only that Joan Aiken, who conceded that her copy editor had a good command of grammar and syntax, was lucky, because such is not always the case. Recently, for instance, I had a short sentence from Cornelia Funke's forthcoming fantasy for children: "The dragon had laid his head on his paws." No problem there, you might think. But "laid" was crossed out by the copy editor, who had substituted "lain." As a result, just in case anyone thought I was merely being obstructive, I had to spend several minutes typing out a little lesson on the difference between the verbs "to lie," as in "to lie down," intransitive, and "to lay," transitive, their past participles being respectively "lain" and "laid." The same copy editor tried to do away with my semi-colons; she could with advantage have been given copies of Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* and James Cochrane's *Between You and I*, which hasn't had quite the same amount of publicity but does the same job for grammar as Lynne Truss does for punctuation, and which would have taught my copy editor the difference between "may" and "might."¹⁸

These last remarks derive from the nuts and bolts of translation, but they are my attempt to sketch an answer to the question of how the translated foreign text differs from the English language text. Concerned as I am with practical translation, I can only say that to my mind it should differ as little as possible in point of readability, but can offer something else in terms of content. And I for one consider myself lucky to have fallen, by pure accident, into a profession which provides so much interest and variety, and so many enjoyable challenges. Translation is not, by its very nature, a high-profile craft. If you have spun your illusion successfully, then you are quite rightly invisible. If reviewers don't comment on a translation, it has worked.

For to my mind the translator is constantly walking a tightrope, owing an equal duty to the original author and to the readers of the translation, trying not to fall off that tightrope between languages, but to preserve the illusion that what was thought and written in one can be read and understood in its essentials in another.

Notes

¹ This chapter is a transcript of the opening speech at the Shelving Translation conference, 17 April 2004 (eds.)

² The “statement of intent” / call for papers is reproduced below (eds.):

“The idea that the act of translation should be visible in the finished work has come to dominate academic discussions of translated literature. This imperative arises from largely ethical considerations: the English language should not subsume the original, the reader should be made to confront the otherness of the foreign culture. Consequently, the translated text is set apart and expected to fulfil a role over and above that of literature in general. In order to investigate this distinction, we are concentrating on the afterlife of the translated text on the shelf.

The questions we are asking, therefore, pertain not to the process but to the product of translation:

A) What is the role of the translated text in Britain today?

B) How does it differ from that of the English language text?

We are inviting publishers, translators, reviewers and academics to come and help us explore these issues. We welcome papers that look at translated texts by contemporary writers from any language. Your approach could be comparative—for example, how the work has been received at home and abroad. You may want to examine the way in which a particular foreign literature is represented in Britain, or you might consider genre-specific reception: detective fiction, children’s literature, autobiography etc. We want to know what is out there on the shelves and what this means for the British reading public. What is the true potential and purpose of contemporary literature available in English translation?”

³ Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁴ Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003).

⁵ Ernst Meister, *Between Nothing and Nothing*, selection trans. Jean Boase-Beier (London: Arc, 2003).

⁶ E. T. A. Hoffman, *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr*, trans. by Anthea Bell as *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr* (London: Penguin, 1999).

⁷ Karen Duve, *Regenroman* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1999); trans. by Anthea Bell as *Rain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

⁸ Boris Akunin, *Azazel*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield as *The Winter Queen* (London: Random House, 2003).

⁹ Anna Politkovskaya, *Putin’s Russia*, trans. Arch Tait, (London: Random House, 2004).

¹⁰ Cornelia Funke, *Tintenherz* (Hamburg: Dressler, 2003), trans. by Anthea bell as *Inkheart* (London: Chicken House, 2003).

¹¹ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Leichter als Luft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), trans. by David Constantine as *Lighter than Air* (London: Bloodaxe, 2002).

¹² René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo, *Astérix le Gaulois* and other titles (Paris: Dargaud, 1959 ff); trans. by Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge, *Asterix the Gaul* and other titles (London: Orion, 1969 ff).

¹³ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Munich: Hanser, 2001), trans. by Anthea Bell as *Austerlitz* (London: Modern Library, 2001).

¹⁴ Gilles Rozier, *Une Amour sans résistance*, trans. by Anthea Bell as *Love Without Resistance* (London, 2005).

¹⁵ Georges Perec, *La Disparition* (Paris: Denoël, c.1969), trans. Gilbert Adair as *A Void* (London: Harvill, 1994).

¹⁶ Traudl Junge, ed. Melissa Müller, *Bis zur letzten Stunde* (Munich: Claassen, 2002), trans. by Anthea Bell as *Until the Final Hour* (London: Arcade, 2003).

¹⁷ Sibylle Knauss, *Evas Cousine* (Munich: Claassen, 2000), trans. by Anthea Bell as *Eva's Cousin* (New York: Ballantine, 2002).

¹⁸ Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (London: Gotham, 2003); James Cochrane, *Between You and I* (London: Icon, 2003).