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TRANSLATORS ARE SERVANTS, BUT THEY NEED NOT BE SERVILE

On 31 March 1971 the B. B. C. broadcast an interview by Donald McLachlan, a former editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, with the linguist Paul Schmidt. Schmidt had a working knowledge of as many as twenty languages, but what deserves more interest is that from 1933 to 1945 he was Adolf Hitler's personal interpreter. In that function he was present at almost all of Hitler's conferences, ably translating and minuting all that was said. More than that, it was he who received the British ultimatum to Hitler in 1939, presented the German ultimatum to the Russians two years later and prepared the deportation of Hungarian Jews in 1943. He became, as he remarked with a smile, "a piece of Hitler's furniture".

Although he had a dislike for Hither from the beginning, Schmidt accepted the job of interpreter because of what he described as the interesting perspectives offered by high-level diplomacy. He would be able to travel widely and to meet the world's political leaders on the most momentous occasions. In the interview he recalled with remarkable relish how at lunches or dinners he managed both to translated and to eat by always taking small bites at a time. Even when with keen psychological insight he recognised the baseness of his employer's tactics, he could not bring himself to give expression to his disgust and resign from his post. In that case, he explained, Hitler would simply have said: "But next week Chamberlain is coming!" or something like that.

A generation later translators are at work in the comfortable air-conditioned offices of Shell, Dow Chemical, General Electric, Fokker, and in the equally comfortable offices of the administrations of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Common Market. Their top salaries and excellent social-security provisions guarantee them an existence free from financial cares. They perform their work as translator with all the fidelity and accuracy they possess, they maintain professional secrecy, they never discredit the profession, and they refuse to work for fees lower than those set by their translators' organisation. Meanwhile the Third World continues to be pillaged of its raw materials, and the wars in Indo-China and in Portugal's African colonies go on. And what of the suppression of civil liberties in Eastern Europe, or in the West the manipulation of the electorate, the deception of the news-reading

and TV-watching public, and the frenzied promotion of ever more useless consumer articles?

No one would wish to defend Paul Schmidt. It is evident to all that he was wrong, that he served unacceptable aims which brought disaster over the world. It is high time, then, that a good many translators today realised that, essentially, they are doing the same thing. For what, in fact, does a translator do? As a paid servant he allows his employer to use him as an instrument to attain certain ends. More than that, in addition to being a servant, he can also choose to be servile, turning out the translations ordered without ever wondering whether he agrees with those ends. Should he need to justify himself, he can always say: "My boss pays me for it and that's that." But in doing so he is making the same catastrophic mistake as Paul Schmidt. This is not to say that translators today are neo-Nazis, but merely that it is all too easy to be lured into collaboration with unacceptable practices, whether by the interesting perspectives of high-level diplomacy or by the comforts of top salaries, social security, and air-conditioned offices.

Yet what are unacceptable practices? Translators are by virtue of their profession presumed to be well-informed and acute thinkers, so they should not need to be told that the United States Government, the Common Market, and corporations like Shell are systematically plundering the Third World of its raw materials; that Dow Chemical, General Electric, and many other industrial giants are making millions of dollars on the war in Indo-China; that Fokker is doing the same in Portuguese Africa; that the Soviet Government is systematically restricting Russian's and others' liberties; and that this black list is tragically incomplete. Can a translator, if he is aware of these things, presume to argue that these organisations are engaged in acceptable practices? Can he in all honesty go even further, daring to work for them, daring to collaborate by translating the manipulate words of the Nixons and the Pompidous, working for the Springer press, lending his aid to an international advertising campaign for some completely superfluous make of four-sided stereo equipment? Not if he has any political conscience. the Nuremberg trials may have acquitted Paul Schmidt, history has not. His example is there to point up the fact that an interpreter or translator not only must be competent, but must have a political conscience. It is there to confirm the fact that every person is always automatically on one side or another politically.

What is more, anyone who is not aware of this position is usually on the wrong side, however much he may try to defend his collaboration with such terms as “impartiality” and “objectivity”. Many people today, and especially those in settled positions, are afraid of anything that has to do with politics. They have found their own happiness, or believe they have, and they do not want to be bothered by the fact that others have not. If politics in the widest sense of the word is the pursuit of happiness for all, no wonder that they are afraid. They simply do not want to be confronted with the fact that they, by virtue of their positions of wealth and health, share in the guilt for the misery of the countless “wretched of the earth”, as Frantz Fanon called them.

This article is meant to be such a confrontation. It is meant to be an appeal to translators to stop soothing their political consciences and to develop them instead. Developing your political conscience means acting according to it. It means taking seriously Article 7 of the code of Honour presented at the F. I. T. Congress held at Lahti in 1966, which says that the translator must refuse any task which he thinks destined for illegal or otherwise inadmissible aims or which in his opinion in contrary to the public interest. What it comes down to is a matter of choosing sides. Choosing, before the choice is made for you!

Of course it is not enough to disagree, to protest, and to refuse. I quite agree with those conservatives who demand of radicals that they should be constructive as well as critical. To this end the politically conscious translator that I have in mind should actively seek out and accept only those commissions for translations which will contribute towards such important goals as self-determination for the Indo-Chinese and African peoples, towards the ending of all colonialism and neo-colonialism, towards the protecting and furthering of free expression, towards complete and many-sided information of the public, towards a rational allocation of economic resources. Where scientific and technical texts are involved, the politically conscious translator will have to ask himself who is going to profit. For example, it mus surely be infinitely better to cooperate in the improvement of agricultural methods or medical facilities than to help a few patriots reach the moon before the other side. Literary texts, too, many confront the politically conscious translator with a political as well as an aesthetic choice. In *belles-lettres*, as elsewhere, the political implications may lurk

between the lines.

The politically conscious translator looks upon it as essential for him to be able to judge each individual translation task on its political merits, and if necessary, to refuse it. This he cannot do, if he is the employee of an organisation, since obviously very few organisations would not present him with this dilemma. Therefore, he will generally prefer to work on a free-lance basis. By the nature of his profession, he will still be a servant, but not a servile one, for he chooses his own master. Readers may perhaps object that translators with such a radical view of the profession would not be able to earn a decent living. I can only answer that a "decent living" can be surprisingly cheap. We really do not need all the luxuries that our consumer society tries to press upon us. Besides, it is better to be a poor revolutionary than a rich collaborator.

What is your reaction?

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