

Patricia Claxton

**The Foundation of
The Literary Translators Association
of Canada**
(15 MAI 1975)

It was a conference of literary translators sponsored by the Canada Council at Stanley House in the Gaspé last July that started our gropings toward an association of literary translators.

The idea and the organization of that conference, and also, I might add, an enormous amount of the work that has gone into this gathering, we owe to Philip Stratford. The participants at Stanley House were people he knew and felt would make a useful contribution. The one regrettable absence was that of a representative of the publishing community in Toronto. One was expected but didn't arrive, and so Pierre Tisseyre, who represented French publishing, had necessarily to serve doubly. Naim Kattan was there to represent our host, to tell us of the Council's role in translation and to give us the benefit of his vast knowledge of the literary scene both French and English. My role was no more than anyone else's. The reason it falls to me to outline the collective thinking of the Stanley House Group today is because I was the one who was designated to take notes once in a while and nobody else could be expected to make any sense out of my chicken tracks.

A particularly pleasant aspect of the conference was that everyone expressed himself in French or English as spirit moved, and I doubt that any of us will remember clearly which part of what discussion went on in which language.

We began as a group of strangers for the most part. Under Philip's relaxed guidance, and benefiting from the Council's warm hospitality, however, we found very quickly that we had a great deal in common, and that the concerns, satisfactions and frustrations we expressed were shared by all to an astonishing degree. Letters and comments we have received in response to our invitation to these meetings give further evidence that there is indeed a place for an association such as we propose.

At this point I should mention that the Stanley House Group considered at length an

ASSOCIATION DES TRADUCTEURS LITTÉRAIRES

affiliation with an existing professional association of translators. This idea was set aside, rather regretfully since it would offer us advantages such as the use of existing facilities and so forth, and since we would certainly be made welcome. The determining factors were that, first, the professional associations are necessarily provincial in scope and our prospective members are scattered right across the country, and second, our problems and preoccupations are for the most part very different to theirs. Our interests are in fact much more akin to those of the writers' groups, but we really don't fit into that framework either. So it was decided that we should paddle our own canoe, hoping to establish and maintain cordial relationships with both the professional translators' and writers' groups.

You will see from the proposed constitution that we will be submitting this afternoon that we have abstained from trying to propose a rigid *fait accompli*. We don't pretend to be able to spring Venus full-armed from the head of Jupiter. At the initial stage and for the first year we visualize a rather skeletal structure, with flesh to be added a year from now after some work by a number of committees.

There are some important things that emerge in the Stanley House Group's thinking that I should make clear before we get specific about what our proposed association should be able to do. Here and throughout, these remarks apply equally to translation into French and into English, and where other languages are involved too.

Our first point involves the material expectations for literary translators. It may come as a surprise that, thanks to the Canada Council, translators working within the system of the Council's grants are better remunerated, as far as basic fees are concerned, than translators in other countries with which we are in close contact. However, translators who have been working in the commercial field and who feel that they have been hiding their light under a bushell should understand that they will most certainly not fare as well financially in literary translation as in the commercial. In other words, you have to make a sacrifice for the privilege of intellectual stimulation and/or artistic satisfaction, and your name on the work. The chances of full time employment as a literary translator are pretty slim. It does indeed seem that the literary translator in this country will for some time yet have to consider himself a professional on a part time

basis.

The second is that these days there's far too much of "more for us and to hell with the consequences for everybody else." If that is to be the attitude of this organization it will surely die, because a number of established translators whom I won't name will bale out very quickly. In other words, this organization must be a conscientious and responsible member of the literary community.

The third is that one of this organization's primary aims must be to foster quality in literary translation. It therefore cannot say, "come one, come all." It cannot be simply an "amicale", a tea-and-crumpets club of people who like the idea of being literary translators. This surely follows from the principle of making it a responsible body worthy of respect.

This being said, let's turn to what it can or ought to be able to do.

In the first place it can inform. Since the initiation of the Canada Council's programme of aid for translation the number of translations published has risen dramatically. Details I'll leave to Naim Kattan. This has been documented in Philip Stratford's and Maureen Newman's *Bibliography of Canadian Books in Translation*, prepared for the Humanities Research Council of Canada, an enormously valuable reference which has just been published in the current issue of *Meta*, the *Translator's Journal*. Copies of this, a special Twentieth Anniversary issue, are available for anyone who would like one, from Maureen Newman herself, who is helping us with registration and a number of other things. The association will be able to obtain advantageous subscriptions of *Meta* for its members. The association could assist in updating this bibliography from time to time, and keep a record of current translation projects under way, all of which could be made available to members, and to publishers. It could also keep a list of titles recommended for translation, Canadian classics which have never been translated, for instance, as well as current works. There is a great deal that could be done in this vein. Naturally, the association can inform in a more intangible way, too, through meetings among us and direct contact. It can help alleviate that sense of isolation that we all feel to varying degrees. Probably no one but other translators can really

understand the solitary stresses we experience as we struggle to fit ourselves inside other peoples' skins. The willingness of members to play their part in all this will of course be essential.

Something that is most urgent is that the literary translator achieve some status. The Canada Council's translation prizes give us a great boost, but we still have a long way to go. The literary translator does in fact command considerable respect all over the world, but not in the English-speaking world, unless he's made his name first in some other way. This rubs off on the translator into French chez nous, though I think to a lesser extent, perhaps because translation into French has been such a fact o life for so long, though not in literature. The basic reason for this lack of recognition, we may suspect, is that the Anglophone can't imagine how anyone could be so foolish as to have been born speaking anything but English. Shades of Ralph Rackstraw. So what is the translator's image? It's either the impoverished little scribe toiling away in his dingy attic room, more for love than anything else and probably because he's not clever enough to do anything more noble, or else the sausage machine: put language A in one end, along with all kinds of money, turn the crank, and out comes language B from the other end. This is reflected in the attitude of reviewers, who often ignore the fact that a book's is a translation, even in giving the title and author. But then, maybe the publisher hasn't considered it relevant to mention that little detail in what he has fed the reviewer. We sometimes get an unintended compliment when the reviewer says that author X's style is pleasing or something similar which is pretty cold comfort. If we are mentioned it's often darkly suggested that if the book has shortcomings it's no doubt all our fault. To be fair, it must be said that some reviewers do comment on the translation, but all too few. We realize that reviewers aften aren't in a position to judge our work, but what really grates is being simply ignored by reviewers and everyone else too as an insignificant but unfortunately necessary and fiendishly expensive part of a book's production.

Most often our relationships with our publishers are also coloured by this attitude, which is reinforced by the fact that under present Canadian copyright law, in the absence of contract stipulation we have no rights whatever, though Canada supposedly

ASSOCIATION DES TRADUCTEURS LITTÉRAIRES

recognizes the International Copyright Convention which states firmly that we do, and though there is some support in Canadian jurisprudence for the view that a translation is, for copyright purposes, an original literary work. At present, however, unless our contracts specify otherwise, copy editors can and do feel free to change our texts without our approval, our texts can be used in any way a publisher sees fit without compensation or even acknowledgment, and if a translated book does take off and become a best seller we have no possibility of even a small financial share in its success. In other words, when we receive a fee for our translation, we are presumed to have sold it outright. This is not so in other countries, and in France a translator is not even permitted by law to sell his rights outright.

To any of you hoping to get a model contract immediately I'm afraid we have to disappoint you. This is something that will have to be studied in committee. We have some excellent documentation on practices and trends in Great Britain and the United States but we need some other material and some time to say nothing of a great deal of work. Since publishers' contracts even with authors vary enormously, it is unrealistic at this time to propose one for all translators. We must recognize, too, that an untried or semitrained translator cannot expect to obtain contract terms identical to those given an established one. As to royalties, the question is tied very much to the fact that our basic fees are relatively high, this thanks to the Canada Council. We could therefore only reasonably envisage royalties in the context of the best seller, beginning in a sales range which surpasses the usual for book sales in this country.

There is a great deal this association can do in the field of rights, privileges and contracts, but need I stress again, we must be constructive, not merely disruptive. We must not lose sight of the fact that the position of the trade book industry in this country is precarious. I won't dwell on that because I'm sure Jack McClelland and Pierre Tisseyre will give you some pretty pertinent facts. We must also be ready to listen to complaints from publishers and writers about translators, both generally and specifically, and to sift and evaluate such complaints and look for remedies where there appears to be justification.

ASSOCIATION DES TRADUCTEURS LITTÉRAIRES

We have been in touch with the Guild of Professional Translators in the United States and with the Translators Association of the Society of Authors in Great Britain and have had very generous assistance with information from both. We therefore know the practices and policies in these two countries and we hope shortly to have similar information from France. We also have the most recent recommendations of the Translators Committee of the American P.E.N. Centre.

We know we are well within the bounds of reason, then, when we say, as a matter of principle, why shouldn't we expect to be consulted when changes are made in our texts? Why should our names not appear on dustcovers as well as on title pages, and why shouldn't they appear in all publicity releases and advertising? Why should we not have some modest stake in the use of our work for subsidiary purposes, and why should there not be some provision for the translator's participation in the life of a book in such case as it becomes a best seller? Why should the rights to the translation not revert to the translator in case of non-publication? Why should the translator not receive a few free copies of his published work, and be able to buy additional copies at the standard author's discount? On the other hand, it is surely reasonable for the translator to bear the cost, beyond a certain small percentage, of changes he makes in his text in the proof stage (other than printers' errors). None of these are unknown features and some are common in Great Britain and the United States.

The Stanley house Group hopes that these remarks will help to clarify our thinking in proposing an association of literary translators, and also, very sincerely, that they will reassure publishers, and authors too, that we intend to take, as I've said, a conscientious and responsible position in the literary community.

In these two days we hope to hear a great deal from you who we've invited here, and in the months and years to come, that there will be many of us working together toward building something we can look to with pride.