

# Translators on Translating

*Inside the invisible art*

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## FOREWORD

**A**s one of the first readers of a new book, the writer of a foreword is in a privileged position. One is sometimes pleasurably surprised, and so it was with this book. During my first reading of *Translators on Translating*, I found much that was new to me. Yet Andrew Wilson is by no means the first to publish a compendium of writings in this field. In the past forty years, *traductologues* (the English term is “translation studies scholars”) have published a large number of collected texts about translation: among others, Thomas R. Steiner (1975), André Lefevere (1977 and 1992), Paul A. Horguelin (1981), Julio-César Santoyo (1987), Lieven D’hulst (1990), Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (1992), M.A. Vega Cernuda (1994), Harald Kittel (1995), García D. López (1996), Douglas Robinson (1997), Lawrence Venuti (1999), and Martha P.Y. Cheung (2006). So why publish a new selection, and how is this one different from those that came before?

First of all, it is the work of a translator, not a *traductologue*, and one who wishes to give a voice to translators themselves rather than a theorist who presumes to speak for them. Wilson also sets out to show that a practitioner, in reflecting on his or her work and profession, has just as much of value to say as an academic who extracts theory from an examination of originals and their translations. This volume brings translators out from the shadows that most work in, whether their field of translation is literary, technical, official, or religious. In the author’s words, “One of the most enjoyable aspects of reading translators on translating is to watch from the sidelines as they pit creativity, experience, and tools of their trade against difficult source and target texts (and sometimes difficult authors and publishers).”

This book offers a professional translator’s view of how his past and present-day colleagues have described their trade. His trawl through various sources has netted a plenitude of challenges that translators face in attempting to render – with elegance and precision – words said, and often well said, in a foreign language and culture. He touches on all the classic subjects: approaches to translation, cognitive processes, professional training, localization, translating for the theatre, literary and

technical translation, literal versus free translation, the author/translator relationship, the business of publishing, (in)visibility of the translator, film dubbing, the pleasure of translating, “improving” source texts, types of translators, ethics, contracts, and so on. There is humour too in this work, which is spiced with delicious anecdotes and punctuated with quotations. Some extracts touch us in purely human terms, notably the confidences offered by the American novelist Paul Auster and by Cathy Hirano, a Canadian translator who lives in Japan. The extracts, collected from articles, monographs, manuals, blogs, and websites, are put in context by brief introductions, giving one the impression of a dialogue between reader and translators as they talk about the trade. The sum of the book’s various parts almost provides sufficient source material for a small treatise on approaches to translation.

Many of the texts take us into the translator’s “workshop.” We accompany translators in their tentative first passes at a text, and marvel at the inspired final draft. We look over their shoulders as they assess a difficult passage, weigh possible solutions, compare alternatives, and verbalize their reasoning, rather like the Think-Aloud Protocol sessions so beloved of psychologists (and some *traductologues*). The examples intelligently and subtly dissected for us by Robert Paquin, William Weaver, Emma Wagner, and the author himself prove that translation, although a complex art, is not an art of the impossible. Alphonse de Lamartine once said, “Of all the books one may take on, the hardest, in my opinion, is a translation.” The philosopher Emil Cioran went even further: “I place a good translator above a good author.” Well, that is one point of view. But what is undeniable is that a translator is a “second author,” as Leonardo Bruni recognized back in the fifteenth century in his *De interpretatione recta*. “Second author” does not, however, mean “secondary author.”

Even if it is true, as Eugene Eoyang says of imperfect translations, that like certain wines, language doesn’t necessarily “travel well,” it is also true that, yes, the miracle is possible. There are, doubtless, errors in translations of the Koran or the Bible, but there are also – as in any good translation – passages that truly do inspire. How else can one explain the enduring success of the King James Version? And yes, a translation can eclipse the source text. Was it not Goethe who preferred Gérard de Nerval’s translation of *Faust* to his original? “I no longer care to read *Faust* in German,” he said, “but in this French translation, it reads anew with freshness and vitality.” A splendid compliment to a translator from an author of genius. And why should we not recognize that there are translators of genius? The occasional errors and imprecisions that mar even the best translations can be excused when one

understands the fine scales and balances that are the tools of the translator's trade. The art of choosing the right word, the right tone, the right rhythm is far harder than it seems at first glance. Paradoxically – and notoriously – it is when a translation is successful that critics pay it least attention. How can one not see this as an injustice to master translators?

Paging through this volume, one is struck yet again by the extent to which the field of translation is riven by debate and contradiction. As Theodore Savory observed several decades ago, throughout history translators have “freely contradicted each other on nearly all aspects of their art.” The three thousand quotes in my recently completed dictionary, *La traduction en citations* (2007), certainly testify to that. As I worked on the book, nothing struck me more clearly than the fact that translators have differing opinions on everything. Where one sees black, another sees white; opposing points of view abound. *Translators on Translating* provides yet more proof of this. Indeed, the book has barely been opened before we witness an argument, pitting the redoubtable professor Lawrence Venuti against the doyenne of British translators, Anthea Bell. The subject of their debate... Well, you'll just have to read the author's introduction and make up your mind about who is right.

The great merit of Andrew Wilson's compilation is to turn the floor over to the translators. I fully agree when he writes, “While too much of the scholarly writing about translation is turgid academic-speak, it is safe to say that the field is also well served by lively minds who express themselves very well indeed.” *Translators on Translating*, engagingly written and jargon-free, is an eloquent confirmation of this point of view. I am confident that, like me, readers will find it contains unexpected delights. In publishing this book, the author performs a valuable service to translators and to our profession.

JEAN DELISLE, Gatineau, Québec, 2008

*Quotations by Alphonse de Lamartine, Emil Cioran, and Johann Wolfgang Goethe are translated by Jean Delisle.*