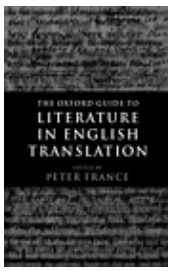
Peter France

THE ART OF THE TRANSLATOR

Peter France ponders how much of the finest writing in English is in fact in translation, and how great has been the work of those unobtrusive 'post-horses of civilization', the translators.



Why, as I finished work on another large Oxford project, the *New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*, did I embark on a second long haul, editing a work that proved even more complicated, the *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*? Mainly, I think, because of a need I perceived, related to the paradoxical situation of translation.

Translation is, or can be, both absorbing and rewarding. As a translator I know that there is a fascination in living at such close quarters with a writer, engaging with every word they wrote, trying to make another text which is worthy of the original. But there is also a melancholy of translation. Compared with other writers, translators feel undervalued. It is not so much that they are badly paid (this is a problem they often share with those they translate) as that they are downgraded, damned with faint praise, criticized in passing and, unkindest of all, ignored. All are aware, and if they weren't critics would remind them, of the inadequacy of their efforts - 'the translator is a betrayer' goes the old refrain, unthinkingly.

Translation, seen by Florio, the great Montaigne translator, as a secondary and 'female' activity, has little status compared with 'original' creation. It often seems that the translator's best role is that of self-effacing servant, a transparent glass through with the original is viewed. But if the translator as traitor is uncomfortably visible, the translator as servant suffers from invisibility. His or her work is taken for granted, as if it were simply mechanical, the translator's name is often barely acknowledged in title pages, reviews and the like, translators struggle to achieve the recognition implied by royalties (or in the university world, the approval of the RAE).

Translations, from the Bible to *Pinocchio*, are an essential part of English-language culture, but they occupy a small place in histories of literature and in anthologies of English poetry (Christopher Ricks's new *Oxford Book of English Verse* is an honourable exception). Those reading translations often seem unconscious of the fact, as if in reading Garnett they were simply reading Dostoevsky - it is easy to overlook the fascinating work of rewriting that translation represents.

So the aim of this new book is to bring translation out of the shadows, to celebrate the work of the innumerable translators who have done so much to enrich our culture. The 113 contributors have written for general readers and students of world literature rather than preaching to the converted, the specialists in Translation Studies. We raise some of the theoretical issues posed by translation, we offer an outline history of translation in Britain and North America, and we discuss some problems raised by particular types of text, but the great bulk of the Guide is devoted to a critical account of the actual body of literature in English translation. Each discussion, which may concern a text, an author, a genre, or a whole national literature, combines a historical study of the way translation has evolved with a critical assessment of the more important translations.

At the same time, we didn't want to limit ourselves to the Homers and the Baudelaires, but to say something of the less familiar pleasures that can be found in translations from Hungarian, Icelandic, or Korean. The result could perhaps be described as a rich patchwork. A book made by many hands produces many different approaches, and as I look at the finished product, I can see some unexpected emphases, some inconsistencies perhaps—I hope these will remind the reader that reference books are made by human beings who write with passion and commitment.

A moment ago I spoke of 'celebration', but a guide cannot be merely celebratory. Taking translation seriously means stressing problems and weaknesses as well as successes. For example, the classic translations of Tolstoy by the Maudes, Constance Garnett, and Rosemary Edmonds have their virtues, but Catriona Kelly is surely right to suggest that it is time 'for a more adventurous rendering, treating the English language as recklessly as Tolstoy did his own mother tongue'. Not that there are any universal standards of criticism. In these matters, judgments are as subjective as in other art. Not everyone will agree with some of the

opinions to be found in the *Guide*. But a guide has to offer guidance, and subjectivity is tempered here by knowledge and experience.

Finding fault is not the main thing, however. It is all too easy to criticize translators for deforming, adulterating, or otherwise betraying the original, but more rewarding to seek to understand and enjoy the variety of translation projects and translation practices. Good translations are good books in their own right, not just reflections of good books. So much would be readily agreed for Pope's Homer and Dryden's Virgil; it can be said too of many of the more recent translations discussed here, from Arthur Waley's *Tale of Genji* to Peter Bush's Goytisolo, from Edwin Morgan's Mayakovsky to A.K. Ramanujan's versions of Classical Tamil poetry. Let me quote just one brief example, from James Greene's *Mandelstam*:

Oh if some day—sidestepping sleep and death—
A goad of air or summer's sting
Could pierce me into hearing
The buzz of earth, buzz of the earth.

So, thinking over all I've discovered in editing this book, I'm left with two powerful impressions. How much of the finest writing in English is in fact translation! And how great has been the work of those unobtrusive 'post-horses of civilization', the translators!

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Reference : http://www.oup.co.uk/academic/humanities/literature/viewpoint/peter_france/

The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation

Edited by **Peter France**, Professor Emeritus and Honorary Fellow, University of Edinburgh

Price: £85.00 (Hardback)
0-19-818359-3
Publication date: 24 February 2000
680 pages, 234mm x 156mm