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APPROACHING THE HISTORY OF TRANSLATION

From the very beginning, *Babel* has published articles on the evolution of the art of translation, and three years ago a regular column was opened dealing with the same theme. Now, while the series of articles in *Babel* will be continued, the idea of a book surveying the subject has come to the fore.

With the emergence of this idea, it is only proper that doubts, too, should emerge. One critic has rightly pointed out that a survey of this kind would have to range over twenty-five centuries, and not even ten volumes could really do justice to the subject. Another has proffered the benevolent advice that, though it is obvious that *the* history of translation cannot yet be written, a collection of *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Übersetzung* would be quite feasible. Thanks to the scepticism of such critics, as well as to the confidence of those others who have showered me with a wealth of details, bibliographical data, and books, I am now able to sketch more clearly the contours of what was initially a plan rather sensed than thought through.

Probably no one will ever determine beyond all doubt whether there was once a prehistoric language which was the progenitor of all other languages, or whether different groups of human beings in different parts of the world began to speak independently. The problem may be of interest to the linguist, but it is not to the historian of translation.

The historian of translation, looking back to the earliest records of mankind, finds primitive peoples articulating simple words in various ways. Each group or clan considers beings with a different way of articulation as far removed from its own kind as roaring lions or howling wolves. The contact between clans consists of slaughtering one another with stone axes. Then the picture changes. Some clan begin to develop more understanding of each other; discovering what they have in common, they form alliances against wild animals or other human clans, and in some cases even merge.

Human relations begin with mutual understanding. Perhaps it was two young people in love who were the first to understand each other's articulation. Or perhaps it was wise old men. No doubt a number of initiatives more or less simultaneous brought out the advantages of mutual understanding. Thus early man entered new phase in his history. Yet no one remembered the names of those young lovers or wise old men whose initiatives led to this new phase. The first translators were anonymous. Their successors have met a similar fate

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That it has been possible for mutual understanding to develop in the most disparate fields of human relations is a result of the efforts of a host of men and women of the most divergent ages and professions. Questions of war and peace between nations speaking different tongues could be settled thanks to the intermediation of interpreters. Science, too, developed as a consequence of familiarity with research originally written in another language. And the very idea of World Literature owes its existence to the reading of literature in translation.

Without interpreters men would still be killing all who articulate sounds in a different way, and there would be no hope of cooperation on a larger scale. Without specialised translators the scholars of each country would have to conduct their research in national isolation—with the exception, perhaps, of those in the fields of mathematics and music, where international systems of notation have been developed. And without translator poets Shakespeare would be familiar only to the English-speaking, Dante only to Italians, Pushkin only to Russians.

Yet no one knows who it was whose interpreting made it possible for Joseph's brothers and their families to find a home in Egypt. No one knows who mediated the armistice between Greece and Persia in 448 B.C., or who recruited the Germanic warriors for the Imperial Army of Rome. Poles and Lithuanians of today have no idea who formulated the Lublin Union of 1569, though that agreement made their ancestors compatriots for more than three hundred years. Likewise, French, Italian, American, and Chinese scientists, building their research on the foundations of the quantum theory and the theory of relativity, hardly know the name of the man who first made the ideas of Max Planck and Albert Einstein accessible to them, even though he must have been a translator who was an eminent scholar in his own right. And who can identify the man who first introduced the Homeric epics to the Romans, thus providing the basis for their own national epic, Virgil's *Aeneid*? True, it is well known that the person who translated the Bible into German was Martin Luther but that is primarily because of the political implications of his deed. And if it had not been for thousands of works of literature available in translation Goethe would never have arrived at the notion of *Weltliteratur* – yet who today knows the merits or faults of those translators, or even their names?

A highly important activity in almost every phase of political and cultural life has

been all but universally disregarded. Throughout history a very peculiar type of human being has succeeded in playing an important role yet passing unnoticed. He stands at the side of two statesmen who desire peace but cannot achieve it without his intermediation. He weighs nouns, verbs, and prepositions on apothecaries' scales, all too aware that one false interpretation in a diplomatic text can lead to war and the death of thousands. He cherishes the ideas of the most subtle theorists as if they were his own, for otherwise he could not be their true ambassador. He writes poems inspired not by a lake, a love, or a lofty ideal, but by another poem. He is an expert in a foreign language, a master in his own, and a specialist in the field he is translating in. He is at one and the same time audacious and humble—for otherwise he could not be a genuine translator.

We must outline his way through world history.

Such a project can only be accomplished by international cooperation. The materials for the history of translation will have to be sought out and ordered in many countries, from sources in a multitude of languages, and to do this successfully the cooperation of a large group of researchers is needed. It is essential that the circle of contributors be as wide as possible, in order to include all those with specialized knowledge in one or more of the periods or aspects of the subject.

A second difficulty lies in the organization of the material. It is clear that the arrangement cannot be strictly and solely chronological. Some chapters, for instance those on translation into French or into Russian, will have to be treated as units with chronological subdivisions. On the other hand, translation into ancient Hebrew, Classical Greek, or Classical Arabic must be considered separately from translation in modern Hebrew, Greek, or Arabic. Some chapters will have to be organized along national lines, and others along chronological, and the two principles must be blended together in a rather complex way.

What follows here is a preliminary draft for an outline of a world history of translation. It goes without saying that as work on the history progresses one point may be absorbed in another and new points may emerge.

A History of Translation

I. *Introduction.* What translation has meant in world history.

II. *The first traces of translation in prehistory.*

III. *The contacts of ancient nations.* Their contacts in practice. Mutual influence in their folk literatures. Translation as a prerequisite for the intrusion of foreign elements in literary masterpieces (the Bible, the Gilgamesh epic, the Rig-Veda, the Homeric poems). Influences due to translation in the literatures of India, Persia, Greece, and Rome. How ancient scholarship spread from one region to another, in particular from Egypt and Asia Minor to Greece. The role of translation in Greek contacts with Persia and India during and after the time of Alexander the Great. Translation and Hellenistic influences in Rome and Egypt. The role of translation in the early spread of Christianity. Translation and the contacts of Rome with the peoples on the northern borders of the empire. Translation and the contacts of early China with India and Japan.

IV. *Contacts of nations in the Middle Ages.* Translation in the period of the Great Migrations. The intermediary role of Arabic and Armenian. The Toledo school of translation. Medieval Latin as a vehicle of translation. Translation in the Byzantine Empire. Translation and Arabic influence in western and central Asia. Problems of translation in Church Latin and Church Slavonic. The role of Middle Persian (Parsi) in translation. Translation into Prakrit languages. Contacts of Chinese culture with India, Japan, and Korea during the Middle Ages. Translation and the formation of the European national languages: most of the first works of literature in the vernaculars were translations or adaptations.

V. *Translation and the modern languages.* The national histories of translation in the modern period: translation into Romance, Germanic, Slavonic, Finno-Ugric, Turkic, Celtic, Albanian, Georgian, Modern Indic, Modern Armenian, Modern Hebrew, Caucasian, Dravidian, Siberian, Mongolian, Chinese, Japanese, Modern Arabic, Indonesian, African, and American Indian languages. Problems of translation in Latin America. Problems of

translation in the former colonies. Translation into artificial languages and experiments in the revival of dead languages.

VI. *Supranational tasks of translation.* Translation and the activities of the United Nations, its specialised agencies, and FIT. The special function of translation in multilingual countries. Experiments in machine translation. The possible role of computers in translation. The role of translation in international affairs. Translation and scientific documentation. The special tasks of translation in bringing together the cultures of East and West. The increasing unity of world literature. Translation as a major instrument of mutual understanding among nations and a promoter of world peace.

The French scholar Georges Mounin, who has kindly evinced interest in the plans for a history of translation, opens the historical chapter in his book *Teoria e storia della traduzione* with the following words: “Through there are world histories of music, art, and literature, up to now there is still no universal, international history of translation.”¹ The Soviet author Andrej Fedotov writes in his book *Vvedenie v teoriju perevoda* (Introduction to the Theory of Translation): “No science can exist without considering and utilising past experiences, the work of those who were formerly active in the same field. Hence what is needed above all is to make use of the materials of the history of translation, abstracting them and drawing conclusions from the clash of opinions and principles regarding the theory of translation.”² These two quotations are sufficient to demonstrate that a general history of translation is an urgent need.

The rich bibliographies in the two books just cited, as well as the many references in a number of other recent publications in various languages³, show that there are already numerous detailed studies of a more restricted scope. This fact, too, points up the need for the findings in them to be incorporated in a larger, more comprehensive survey. It is not surprising, then, that when the concrete proposal for the planning of a general history of translation was presented to the Fifth Congress of FIT in Lahti, Finland, the proposal was greeted with unanimous approval and a Historical Committee was formed as a new standing committee of the federation. The lively correspondence carried on since then has demonstrated that the enthusiasm aroused at Lahti has not slackened.

The publication of a book such as this depends, of course, on the willingness of a publishing house to underwrite the project. Concrete steps in this direction have been taken, and it is to be hoped that the member societies of FIT will also do their best to promote the realisation of this highly important plan.

Quite apart from the envisaged book, *Babel* will continue to publish articles dealing with specific themes in the history of translation. It will then be possible to incorporate the material from these articles in the book. To outline the work already done by *Babel* in this field, the following bibliography lists in chronological order the articles that have been published to date on the history of translation and related subjects.

- Karl Theme: Die geschichtlichen Haupt-Typen des Dolmetschens. I (1955): 55-60.
Helmut von den Steinen: Neugriechische Lyrik in deutscher Übertragung, 11(1956): 57-62.
André Meynieux: Les traducteurs en Russie avant Pouchkine, 111(195Th 73-79.
Eva Paneth: Friedrich von Gentz, a Patron of Translators? III (1957): 87-88.
Duncan Harkin: The History of Word Counts, III (1957): 113-124.
M. Spitzer: Hebrew Translation in Israel, IV (1958): 62-65.
P. E. Klarwill: Translation in New Zealand, IV (1958): 116-118.
Libuse Belska-Fiserova: Théories tchèques de la traduction, IV (1958): 120-122.
Irfan Sahinbas: Translation from World Literature in Turkey, V (1959): 10-14.
D. M. Dunlop: The Work of Translation at Toledo, VI (1960): 55-59.
André Meynieux: L'Antiquité gréco-latine en Russie de Pierre-le-Grand à l'âge d'or, VII (1961): 103-110.
André Meynieux: Pouchkine poète et sa traduction en français, VII (1961): 111-118.
Roll Italiaander: La traduction en Afrique, VII (1961): 147-150.
Melville J. Herskovits: The Myth of the Negro Past, Vii (1961): 164-167.
Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow: The African in Western Literature, VII (1961): 177-183.
W, Schwarz: The History of Principles of Bible Translation in the Western World, DC (1963): 5-22.
Joseph M. Kitagawa: Buddhist Translation in Japan, DC (1963): 53-39.
A. R. Hulst: Bible Translating into Dutch, IX (1963): 79-82.

- Edmond Cary: 'The Word of God into the Languages of Men, IX (1963): 87-91.
- Ivo Vidan: American and English Literature in Yugoslav Translation, IX (1963): 137-139.
- Maurice Lambert: La traduction il y a 4 000 ans, X (1964): 17-20.
- Andre Thérive: Saint Jérôme par Jean Steinmann, X (1964): 70-72.
- Jiřy Levy: Translation in Czechoslovakia, X (1964): 73-76.
- Givi R. Gachechiladze: Literary Translation in Georgia, X (1964): 103-106.
- György Radó: Lea périodes historiques de la traduction en Hongrie. X (1964): 163-164.
- Maria Widnas: Die Übersetzung in Finnland, X (1964): 165-168, 175.
- Strahinja K. Kostić: G. E. Lessing im serbischen Nationaltheater, XI (1965): 16-18.
- Elena Nikolowa-Ruz: La traduction d'oeuvres littéraires en Bulgarie, XI (1965): 22-25.
- Ella Pennanen: Finnish Translators, XI (1965): 60-61.
- Gerhard Aho: Finnish Literature in English Translation, XI (1965): 67.
- Kálmán Kalocsay: La traduction en espéranto, XI (1965): 68-70.
- Linda A. Bertelli: A Glimpse at the History of Translation in Italy, XI (1965): 76-78.
- Givi R. Gachechiladze: Ivane Machabeli, the Great Georgian Translator of Shakespeare, XI (1965): 123-128.
- Arthur J. Weitzman: Oriental Languages and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England, XI (1965): 163-167, 178.
- György Radó: The Works by E. A. Poe in Hungary, XII (1966): 21-22.
- Lars Hamberg: Une destinée de traducteur, XII (1966): 74-76.
- Helmut Prang: Friedrich Rückert als Übersetzer, XII (1966): 105-109.

These articles, of course, are heterogeneous in method, scope, and approach, and they are not all equally historical in emphasis. Nevertheless they help to provide a firm foundation for a more general survey of the subject, and at the same time they demonstrate that such a survey can and must be made.

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- 1) Georges MOUNIN. *Teoria e storia della traduzione* (Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, Turin, 1965). p. 29.
 - 2) Andrej Fgfqtqx, *Vvedenie v teoriju pervoda* (Izdatel'stvo Literatury na Inostrannykh

Jazykakh, Moscow, 1958), p. 20.

3) See e.g. the following:

Karl THIEME, A. HERMAN, and E. GLÄSER, *Beitrage zur Geschichte des Dolmetschens* (Isar, Munich, 1956).

Hans Joachim STORIC (ed.), *Das Problem des Übersetzens* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, and Henry Goverts, Stuttgart, 1963).

Michal RUSINEK (ed.), *O sztuce tłumaczenia* (Ossolineum, Wrocław, 1955).

William ARROWSMITH and Roger SHATTUCK (eds.), *The Craft and Context of Translation* (University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1961: paperback ed. Doubleday, New York, 1964).

The yearbooks *Masterstovo perevoda* (Sovetskij Pisatel', Moscow, 1959 -).

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