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Essay on the Principles of Translation

by Alexander Fraser Tytler

A Common Sense View of the Translator's Art

by

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I. Introduction

In 1791, the first edition of the *Essay on the Principles of Translation* appeared anonymously to considerable public acclaim. Its author, Alexander Fraser Tytler, Lord Woodhouselee, was a prominent Edinburgh lawyer and intellectual. His writings, prior to the publication of the *Essay*, had dwelt almost exclusively on legal matters or more general literary criticism and his credibility was thus based solely on his legal training.[1] And yet, the *Essay* was recognized immediately as a work of critical value in the field of translation.

To appreciate the glowing reception given to the *Essay*, modern readers must attempt to situate themselves in the context of Tytler's time. Even for the educated modern reader, the proliferation of examples in ancient Greek and Latin may seem daunting; unless said reader is a classics scholar, with an in-depth knowledge of both languages, he may indeed wonder what all the fuss was about. For intellectuals of Tytler's day, however, an understanding of Greek and Latin and an appreciation of their classical literatures was considered a basic requirement. Learned readers of the time were accustomed from their earliest schooldays to studying classics in their original languages, and the translation of these works into English was an integral part of a classical education. Translation played a considerable role both in the studies and in the later lives of writers, whether professional or amateur.

Tytler's interest in translation, therefore, despite the fact that he had neither practiced it up to that point nor was involved in a full-time literary career, was not unusual in his own context. Following the first edition, a second, half again as long as the first, with more examples and editorial changes, appeared in 1791. A third then appeared in 1813, a year before Tytler's death, and was again larger by 42% than the second edition. What is surprising is that this work, now more than 200 years old, continues to be cited as a seminal piece of writing in the annals of translation history. The answer must be found in the principles presented in the work itself, as we shall see in this discussion.

II. Tytler's Intellectual Environment

As Jeffrey F. Huntsman notes in his 1978 preface to the third edition, Alexander Fraser Tytler was very much a product of his time. His home was Edinburgh, and the educated intellectual upper-middle class within it. The Edinburgh of the eighteenth century was a lively intellectual city, with a strong

sense of independence from England and London. Huntsman states that the pragmatic achievements of the intellectual community "matched their scholarly interests"[2] and exemplified a practical orientation to the scientific, medical, and philosophical issues of the day.

Tytler was the offspring of an intellectual family. He was educated in Scotland and England and studied law in Edinburgh. After being called to the bar, he both practiced and published numerous works on the law, as well as nurturing a strong interest in history and archaeology, eventually becoming a professor of Greek and Roman antiquities at the University of Edinburgh. In addition to his many intellectual and professional accomplishments, he led what appears to have been a full personal life, marrying the woman of his choice and fathering eight children.

According to his biographers, Tytler laid no claim to genius. While he wrote a good deal, he "had little to offer in the way of original composition".[3] He did however possess a critical turn of mind, combined with wide reading and interests. As Huntsman indicates, his "critical predilections were directly shaped by his character",[4] which was said to be amiable, cheerful and generous. His studies were not in the realm of the abstract or metaphysical, but were rather more down-to-earth, "related to the deeds and language of men".[5] This apparent normalcy is cited as one reason why his works, and especially the *Essay*, appealed so broadly to the reading public. As Huntsman states: "Among his judgments there are few surprises; indeed, the most impressive aspect of his literary criticism is the degree to which we find we must agree with his comments" [he was] "above all a critic of uncommon common sense; not the finest mind of his time, but an exemplary one."[6]

While not himself a man of genius, Tytler appears to have had the ability to express through his writings the predominant philosophical beliefs of his era. He was exposed to the main currents of thought of the time and was able to explain these ideas with clarity. "Tytler's critical response to literature was grounded in the Scottish philosophy of common sense",[7] which was based on introspection into the operations of the human mind. The "common sense" philosophers believed that certain "fundamental truths and judgments about the mind and its operations are apprehensible to direct, intuitive reflection"[8]; in other words, certain principles are self-evident and do not need explanation. This view allowed Tytler to justify his common sense approach to literary criticism and his belief that literature reveals truths about human nature. The *Essay*, with its basic, down-to-earth language and approach, exemplifies his view of criticism. Huntsman notes that in writing the original *Essay* and in its subsequent revisions, Tytler makes little mention of other theorists, particularly the French theorists of an earlier era. Nor is Tytler a comprehensive researcher. He read widely but erratically, and used as examples whatever he was familiar with, not attempting to provide a comprehensive survey of previous or current scholarship. Nonetheless, his "common sense" approach created a work of ongoing interest.

III. The Principles: Tytler's Introduction

Tytler attempts to reduce his principles to three general laws of translation, which he then illustrates with numerous examples. He begins by noting that very little has been written about the principles of the art of translating. There is evidence that classical writers had studied translation and believed it useful, but they left no specific information, only general recommendations as to its importance. In addition, little of the work of the ancients in translation survives, from which precepts could be deduced.

According to Tytler, translation is of greater importance to the moderns, given that the sheer volume of literature far exceeds that known to the ancients. He points out the advantages of good translations in opening "stores of ancient knowledge, and creating a free intercourse of science and of literature.[9] Little has been done to improve the art "by investigating its laws or unfolding its principles",[10] aside from general comments and comparative grammatical studies. He concludes that it is not surprising, given our ignorance of the principles, that there should be so much bad translation done; translations are in high demand and are therefore often done by incompetents, and people believe it does not take much ability to translate.

On the other hand, Tytler stresses that there are some excellent modern translations, from which we can draw principles, rules, and precepts, and even bad translations can be useful in highlighting defects for correction. He then adds an apology for the imperfections of his work and notes that he does not pretend to exhaust the subject.

IV. Tytler's Definition of a "Good" Translation

In Chapter 1, Tytler describes his concept of a good translation and outlines the general rules flowing from that description. There is of course a difference of opinion as to what constitutes a "good translation" and there are two main opinions on what constitutes the work of a translator. Tytler lays them out thus:

1. "it has been affirmed, that it is the duty of a translator to attend only to the sense and spirit of his original, to make himself perfectly master of his author's ideas, and to communicate them in those expressions which he judges to be best suited to convey them."

2. "it has, on the other hand, been maintained, that, in order to constitute a perfect translation, it is not only requisite that the ideas and sentiments of the original author should be conveyed, but likewise his style and manner of writing, which, it is supposed, cannot be done without a strict attention to the arrangement of his sentences, and even to their order and construction." [11]

In one view, the author may be allowed to improve the work; in the other, he must reproduce it in its entirety, including its defects.

For Tytler, perfection lies between the two extremes, as he suggests in this definition: "that, in which the merit of the original work is so completely transfused into another language, as to be as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work."[12] From this principle then flow his three laws of translation: first, that the translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work; secondly, that the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original; and thirdly, that the translation should have all the ease of original composition.[13] Each of these rules is developed and illustrated in the chapters that follow.

V. The First General Rule

To meet the requirements of the first principle **S** that the translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work **S** the translator must have a perfect knowledge of the language of the original and a "competent" understanding of the subject matter. Tytler points out that a translator cannot learn everything from dictionaries and grammar. He discusses the fact that some words in one language have no exact equivalent in another language and that this is especially a problem in "dead" languages. And even if the translator has a mastery of the original language and is competent in the subject matter, he may still have problems. He concludes that where the meaning of a passage is in doubt, the translator must exercise judgment, considering the passage as a whole and the author's usual way of thinking and expressing himself. Copying the confusion of the original is not, in Tytler's view, correct: "to imitate the obscurity or ambiguity of the original is a fault; and it is still a greater, to give more than one meaning".[14]

Still in the context of the first principle, he next considers whether a translator can add to the ideas of the original, to add impact force or to illustrate, or whether he can cut out some of the original ideas to avoid redundancy. He contends that if the translator does this, he must use great caution, but he does not rule out the practice. As he says, any additional ideas must actually increase the impact of the piece, and only non-essential elements may be cut out and not weaken the original. As to the right to correct "a careless or inaccurate expression of the original, where that inaccuracy seems materially to affect the sense",[15] he stresses that the nature of the work should determine the degree of strictness of the translator with regard to the original. For example, "works which consist of fact and detail demand a more scrupulous fidelity than those of which the basis is sentiment".[16] He thus distinguishes between different types of composition in determining the degree of liberty the translator may assume.

This latter point is expanded in Chapter IV, on the freedom allowed in poetical translation.

According to Tytler, the freedom to add or retrench is more allowable in poetry, where we are translating not just language into language but poetry into poetry.[17] In contrast to the translators of the 16th and 17th centuries when, he claims, poetic translators were preoccupied with language, not "poesie", he emphasizes that the poetical translator must never allow the original to become less powerful in translation. Determining how far to take embellishment and correction requires a high level of judgment.

VI. The Second General Rule

According to his second rule, the style and manner of writing in a translation should be of the same character as that of the original. As he reiterates, "next in importance to a faithful transfusion of the sense and meaning of an author is an assimilation of the style and manner of writing in the translation to that of the original."[18] While this is secondary in importance, he suggests that it may be more difficult to accomplish than the first rule, given that the ability to discern and imitate style and manner is more rare than the ability simply to understand the author's sense; without this ability to identify the character of a text and imitate style, the resulting translation will be a distortion of the original. A translator may "discern the general character of his author's style, and yet fail remarkably in the imitation of it."[19] The danger of presenting a false picture is always present.

On a more cautionary note, he then considers the limitations of the rule regarding the imitation of style, stressing that this imitation must be tempered by taking into account the genius of both the language of the original and that of the translation. He notes for example that Latin is more concise than English and that one must often add words or phrases in English to render the original meaning. The transposition of structures is also discussed: "The Latin and Greek languages admit of inversions which are inconsistent with the genius of English",[20] or again "the English language is not incapable of an elliptical mode of expression; but it does not admit of it to the same degree as the Latin."[21]

Still under the rubric of the second principle, Tytler inserts a long discussion on the translation of poetry, and whether a poem can be well translated into prose. He warns of the risk of a loss of beauty in translating poetry into prose and discusses the effects of trying to give "measure" to prose instead of maintaining the original metrical poetic structure of the original poetry. Poetry is different from prose in its character and the nature of its language and "the difficulty of translating poetry into prose is different in its degree, according to the nature or species of the poem."[22] He concludes that "it is impossible to do complete justice to any species of poetical composition in a prose translation; in other words, that none but a poet can translate a poet."[23] Thus, while he does not rule out the possibility of poetic translation, he highlights its difficulties and presents a relativistic view as to the potential for success.

VII. The Third General Rule

The final rule, that a translation should have all the ease of the original composition, is the most difficult rule to observe, according to Tytler. The translator is not free to change the composition unduly; he must obey the rules of the original. Nor is the translator just copying; he uses different "colours" than the original, but must strive to produce the same effect. According to Tytler, he "must adopt the very soul of his author, which must speak through his own organs."[24] Tytler gives many examples of this art, but cautions his readers that "while a translator endeavours to transfuse into his work all the ease of the original, the most correct taste is requisite to prevent that ease from degenerating into licentiousness."[25] The translator must, while writing with the ease of the original, avoid lowering its level.

But what if all three rules cannot be obeyed? Tytler acknowledges that at times a sacrifice must be made. When this is necessary, attention must be paid to the rank and importance of each principle. For example, the translator may have to depart from the manner of the original, as it would not make sense to lose the meaning for the sake of the manner or to sacrifice the sense or manner for the sake of ease of expression. Again, his common sense approach prevails **S** the practicalities of translation make it impossible to achieve perfection and the accomplished translator, armed with principles, will use his judgment to determine the appropriate result. He then returns to the subject of poetry, stating that it is "less difficult to give to a poetical translation all the ease of original composition, than to give the same degree of ease to a prose translation".[26] This is so because the poetical translator has more liberty to change the original, although even here, liberties must be limited.

Tytler discourses at some length here on the translation of idioms. He indicates that the chief difficulty in recreating the ease of expression of the original lies in translating idioms, "those turns of expression which do not belong to universal grammar, but of which every language has its own, that are exclusively proper to it."[27] He refers here not to general "idioms" such as infinitive forms or word order, although he does mention the use of the historical present in French and the use of the "tu" form in French, contrasted with "thee" and "thou" in English. Rather, the problem lies in the translation of particular idioms. Tytler claims that the translation is perfect when "the translator finds in his own language an idiomatic phrase corresponding to that of the original."[28] He warns, however, that translators may take this to extremes, forgetting the country and the era of origin and using allusions to modern manners, which can lead to absurdity. Where necessary, the translator may find phrases without a corresponding idiom in the target language, in which case he must "express the sense in plain and easy language".[29]

Tytler also considers a number of other characteristics of composition, which render translation difficult. He gives the example of the antiquated terms occasionally used by poets,

invented terms, and elaborate phraseology, which must somehow be rendered. He stresses that there is nothing more difficult "to imitate successfully in a translation than that species of composition which conveys just, simple, and natural thoughts"[30]; complex, florid writing is much easier to emulate. Then there are problems in translating simple expressions and natural sentiments which are too deeply rooted in the genius of a language to be translated. And as well, he points out that it is very difficult to translate works containing highly specific terminology, understood only by those with highly developed critical knowledge of the original. In a brief chapter on burlesque translation, he noes that it is not to be considered serious translation, but is more like original composition **S** and that it is only amusing in small doses.

VIII. Tytler's Conclusion

In his concluding chapter, Tytler makes a number of interesting comments and generalizations. He states that talent in one area of translation does not necessarily imply talent in another, for the character of the translation may be very different. He spends some time discussing differences in the genius of different languages or people, using Voltaire's translations of Shakespeare as an example of the distortion caused when the translator does not view the world in the same way as his subject. He claims this was due to the "original difference of his genius and that of Shakespeare, increased by the general opposition of the national character of the French and English."[31] Then, somewhat abruptly, after a brief discussion of the merits of a translation of Rabelais, he ends his *Essay*.

IX. The *Essay* and the Modern Reader

Tytler's *Essay* is in itself not a perfect work of literature. It includes frequent digressions on a variety of topics, and the structure is not always balanced, particularly at the end, where the author concludes so suddenly. As noted earlier, the frequent use of Greek and Latin poses difficulties for the modern reader. There remains, nonetheless, much of value in the text. Tytler is able to chart a course between the two extremes he outlines at the beginning: that it is the duty of a translator to express the sense of the original "in those expressions which he judges to be best suited to convey them", which approaches what we would today call the "cibliste" view of translation, and that "it is not only requisite that the ideas and sentiments of the original author should be conveyed, but likewise his style and manner of writing, which, it is supposed, cannot be done without a strict attention to the arrangement of his sentences, and even to their order and construction"[32], the "sourcier" view. While leaning toward the "cibliste" perspective, he is always careful to stress that the translator does not have unbridled licence and that solid judgment is required before taking undue liberties with an

original text. The rule of sense must prevail; cultivating the ease of the original composition in the target language to the detriment of the author's meaning is not acceptable.

Tytler's work is also valuable in its belief that the degree to which the final product adheres to the original or strays from it is a relative issue, dependent on the nature of the work, whether it be prose or poetry, and on the writing style of the author, among other factors. Thus, while laying out his three rules, he is careful to constantly remind the reader that the application of those rules depends on many factors, including the judgment of the translator.

In fact, it is this emphasis on judgment, and the strong vein of common sense throughout the work, which may be its most valuable contribution. According to Huntsman, "Tytler's intention [...] was to help his readers form individual judgments by providing a set of criteria derived from previous, good translations, not to make an ultimate statement about immutable truth."[33] Tytler's three principles are immediately comprehensible to the reader. Whenever he begins to sound overly dogmatic, he injects a cautionary note, bringing the principles back down to earth. The result is a balanced examination of basic principles for a translator to follow; the fact that we continue to read the work today is a strong indication that Tytler's laws continue to have resonance in the personal experience of translators of our time.

Notes

1. Delisle, J. and J. Woodsworth, eds., *Les traducteurs dans l'histoire* (Ottawa: Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1995), 157.

2. Jeffrey F. Huntsman, introduction to *Essay on the Principles of Translation*, by Alexander Fraser Tytler (Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., 1978), x.

3. *Ibid.*, xvi.

4.*Ibid*., xvi.

5. *Ibid.*, xvii.

6. *Ibid.*, xvii.

7. *Ibid.*, xxiii.

8. ., xxiv.

9. Fraser Tytler, Lord Woodhouselee, *Essay on the Principles of Translation*. Third Edition, 1813. Jeffrey F. Huntsman, ed. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., 1978), 3.

10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 14.
12. *Ibid.*, 15.
13. *Ibid.*, 16.
14. *Ibid.*, 28.
15. *Ibid.*, 54.
16. *Ibid.*, 56.
17. *Ibid.*, 64.
18. *Ibid.*, 109.
19. *Ibid.*, 132.
20. *Ibid.*, 196.
21. *Ibid.*, 198.
22. *Ibid.*, 205.
23. *Ibid.*, 208.
24. *Ibid.*, 212.
25. *Ibid.*, 220.
26. *Ibid.*, 228.
27. *Ibid.*, 251.
28. *Ibid.*, 259.
29. *Ibid.*, 275.
30. *Ibid.*, 325.
31. *Ibid.*, 382.
32. *Ibid.*, 14.

33. Huntsman, xlvi.

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