WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT, TRANSLATOR AND TRANSLATION THEORIST

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The Century between 1750 and 1850 is one of the most brilliant periods in the history of translating in German. The discovery of new fields of culture and language, such as the Oriental or Polynesian ones, as likewise the new direction in aesthetic taste towards the "Romantic" countries (above all, towards Spain), brought about a veritable translation fever in which great figures of German culture — Schiller, Eichendorff, Schlegel, Lessing — either took part or were influenced by same, apart from a long Iist of mentors of the many spiritual tendencies of the time. On the other hand, great translators of the period were enrolled on the list of erudite men who, through their translations, marked out the spirit of this epoch. As a reminder, we would mention the name of Johann Heinrich Voss whose translation of Homer was to become one of the poetic footholds for the Romantic movement, this latter perceiving the author of the *Iliad* as the quintessence of the "natural" or of ingenuous art.

The Marbach Archives of German Literature published a collection of translation studies in Goethe's time under the title of Weltliteratur (the concept by which the as yet non-constituted brotherhood of the diverse poetic latitudes and nations was supposed to be denoted), in order to analyze the reasons which brought about this boom in translation: the widespread interest in language study, the development of libraries under Enlightened Despotism (to prove the point, one could perhaps mention here the incident between Lessing and Voltaire rivalling each other for the post of librarian to Frederick II), the book trade, and last but not least, travel which encouraged spiritual exchange, were all factors which, together with the almost Faust-like translation fever in German, were to make this period one of the most brilliant with regard to translation.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the most versatile personalities of *Goethezeit*, was unable to withstand the spell of translation as a surrogate for a ski11 denied him: poetic creation.

This figure of Post-Enlightenment, who was to intervene decisively as a statesman in the destiny of Germany and in that of post-Napoleonic Europe, and who was to achieve fame as a pedagogue and teacher throughout Europe, devoted his best efforts to clarifying a subject which was being re-discovered at the time: language. Firmly convinced that "language is the shaping organ of thought" *(Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ des Gedankens)*, he was to devote much of his leisure as a civil servant to the study of languages and to linguistic reflection, of which he was to become one of the foremost and most important theorists of the modem era. His humanistic and philological facets are reflected in over a dozen essays and longer writings, all of which were collected in Albert Leitzmann's complete critical edition of the beginning of this Century in 1906. Titles such as *Über den Zusammenhang der Schrift mit der Sprache* of 1823, *Über die Buchstabenschrift und ihren Zusammenhang mit dem Sprachbau* of *1824, Grundziige des allgemeinen Sprachtypus* of the same year or *Uber die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues* of 1827-29, as likewise the chronological order of same bear witness to this extensive and intensive preoccupation with language. This same preoccupation led

him to approach matters of linguistic philosophy, language typology and even contrastive descriptions *(Uber den Dualis)* of the different languages in which he was at least "competent": he knew Basque, Sanskrit, Amerindian languages and above all, the classical languages, with which he had begun his course in the sphere of language. Within this preoccupation with the "organ of thought," his universalistic nature could not help reflecting on the problems and praxis of translation, a praxis which he exercised on his beloved classics. Within this sphere, too, as Leitzmann states, he was dogged by the same fate as in many other fields of his activity: *immer anzufangen und selten zu vollenden* (ever beginning and rarely finishing).

His activity as a translator dates from his first contacts with the classical world in the "Georgia Augusta" University of Göttingen, a university founded in 1737 which became a pioneer of Post-Enlightened culture in eighteenth-Century Germany. The forerunners of this interest in translating the classics were the Voss-Stolberg-Bürger trio, to which the name of the Swiss Bodmer may be added, all of them translators of Homer, an author whom German translators of all times had always been reluctant to translate for several reasons, not the least of which was moral grounds. The difficulties in finding metrical equivalents in German had warded off both poets and translators. However, within the short space of a decade, the German editorial scene was flooded with four translations of Homer which were to cause a lively erudite debate and which were to nourish with fresh sources what was later to be termed German Classicism. By taking up this pro-classical ethos of German culture and by following the universalistic tenets later to be formulated and crystallised by Goethe in the concept of *Weltliteratur* — *an* idea not exclusive to Goethe and one in which both translator and translation were considered as "messengers of world literature" — Wilhelm von Humboldt also acted as a German coloniser in the territories of literature. During his student days in Gottingen, in whose university he was to study for three semesters, he became acquainted with the important names of classical philology, a philology which had one of its bastions in this university. Mitscherlich introduced it with Pindar and Heyne was to do the same with Æschylus. For much of Humboldt's life, he was also to be accompanied by the advice of another great representative of classical erudition, Wolf. His preoccupation with the classics dates from 1792, when he set himself to the task of translating Pindar's Olympic enthusiasm into German for the first time. This Greek lyric poet, edited by Heyne in 1773-1774 (Gottingen), had achieved considerable weight among the lyric poets of *Sturm und Drang.* In 1774, the founding date of the "genial decade", the *Essay on the life and writings of Pindar* was to be published in Strasbourg, which was at the time full of enthusiasm for Goethe and Herder, and inspired by the "Germanie breath". The result of this ethos, of his contact with and interest in Greek literature was a series of translations, either occasional or intended, which were published in the diverse "media" of the time; to this end, we refer basically to magazines of the cultural impact of *Theusche Merkur, Deutsches Museum,* etc., this fact giving some idea of the social echo of translation then.

He translated Pindar's *Olympic Odes* nos. 2, 12, 1, 3, 4, 14, 6 and 15 in this order, that is, 8 of the existing 13 and nos. 4, 1, 9 and 2 of the *Pythians,* that is, 4 of the total 12, as likewise several minor fragments. His preoccupation with the Theban poet spans over a decade — from 1792 to 1804. This rate of production, as may be seen, offers certain guarantees as to the quality of the results, a rate of production which is on the other hand far removed from that imposed on the translator today by the editorial world. However, the steady pace and parsimony in translation of this versatile man, who alternated trips to Spain with university foundations or imperial councils, reached its peak in his translation of Æschylus' *Agamemnon.* This task took him 20 years of leisure time and translation work, from 1797, the date he began the translation, to 1816, the publication date of the

same. A huge amount of manuscripts, corrections and fair copies bear witness to his meticulous working method. Throughout the whole of this period, he continually submitted his work to the advice and criticism of the circle of scholars and poets around him, the final version thus being a brilliantly "assisted" translation. Humboldt began it in Jena, in 1796, fully aware of the work's practical untranslatability, after having left the *Prometheus* to one side. By February 1797, more than half the work was finished and it was thence to accompany him to Berlin, Dresden, Vienna, Paris, Italy, Königsberg and Vienna once more. It was in Vienna that he revised what he had done in 1812, leaving it *druckfertig* or ready for printing. It was not, however, to be printed until 18 16. As we said above, before printing, this *sehr liebe Arbeit* was submitted to the opinion of poets such as Schiller, who noted the original energy and poetic sensuality in this translation, but who reproached Humboldt for non-German tums of phrases *(Wendungen)* which are a striking feature of the Greek text. Goethe was also consulted and enthusiastically praised the translation, more on account of the fact that it gave access to the Greek classic than out of conviction. A.W. Schlegel acknowledged its accurate metre; Fr. Schlegel was to suggest corrections, and scholars such as Hermann or the above-mentioned Wolf were to reproach Humboldt for a lack of fidelity to the original. As may be seen, the fate of any translator is fully illustrated here: whilst Schiller praises Humboldt for fidelity to the original, Wolf criticises him for moving away from it.

Alongside these two most important blocks of his work as a translater, Pindar and Æschylus, fragments are preserved of his translations of Greek and Latin classics, which the politician's pen never quite managed to finish, but which had been dear to the humanist's heart. He translated fragments of Euripides' *Eumenides* and *Coephorae;* Aristophanes' *Lysystrata* and finally passages from Lucretius' De *rerum natura*. Other translation projects never got beyond mere intention.

This practical work of translation was accompanied by a profound reflection on both specific and general procedures and problems, as also by interesting philological exegeses of the texts chosen. The reflections introduced into his version of the *Agamemnon* were considered to be the *Magna Carta* of translation theory in Germany Gand, at the very least, a complementary document to his works on linguistic theory.

The first fact of which he became aware in his experience as a translator was the difficulty and even the impossibility of establishing equivalence between two languages, however closely related these may be. No word of any language is totally equivalent to the corresponding word in the other, for a fundamental fact of linguistic phenomenology, one which undeniably conditions translation, is what we today term *connotation*, a concept that Humboldt terms *Nebenbestimmung.* Connotation belongs to the language in which it is expressed and can hardly be reproduced or translated into another language. Each language formulates concepts differently, with one or another corollary meaning, and with a higher or lesser degree on the emotional scale. Only words which denote objective realities can establish any kind of equality or equivalence *(Gleichheit).*

> *Man hat schon öfters bemerkt, und die Untersuchung sowohl als die Erfahrung bestäitigen es, dass, sowie man von den Ausdrücken absieht, die bloss körperliche Gegenstände bezeichnen, kein Wort einer Sprache vollkommen in einer anderen Sprache gleich* ***ist... Jede Sprache drückt den Begriff etwas anders, mit dieser oder jener Nebenbestimmung,*** *eine Stufe* ***höher oder tiefer*** *auf der* ***Leiter der Empfindungen aus.***

It is therefore the intrinsic connotation of each of the terms of a language which leads translation to a cul-de-sac. Humboldt was so convinced of this "impossible" situation that he even postulated the aporetical nature of the basic virtue in the spiritual matrimony into which the translator enters with the text: fidelity. The more the translator

strives to force the text into a mathematically calculated accuracy in establishing equivalente, the more he diverges from this intended fidelity:

> *Man kann sogar behaupten, dass eine Übersetzung um so abweichender wird, je mühsamer sie nach Treue strebt.*

This statement, which might seem strange at first glance, is based on two other componential levels of language which any translator should bear in mind: what Humboldt terms the generality *(Allgemeinheit)* and particularity *(Eigentümlichkeit)* of a language, two dialectic components which should be kept in a just ratio when translating, for, if not, the more one endeavours to reproduce the minimum peculiarities of a text, the more one will elude its generality:

> *Denn sie sucht alsdann auch feine Eigentiimlichkeiten nachzuahmen, vermeidet das bloss Allgemeine.*

This happy medium between linguistic generality and particularity should be obtained through "einfache Treue" (simple fidelity), a term which means fidelity oriented to the *overall* nature of the original, not to its peculiarities:

> *Diese Treue muss auf den wahren Charakter des Originals, nicht, mit Verlassung jenes, auf seine Zufdlligkeiten gerichtet sein.*

The result of a translation oriented in this way will effectively register certain "strange" components, that is, the non-existent connotative elements in the L2, components which on this basis will hence become enriching elements in the translation and will serve as a last on which to broaden its possibilities. To put it more precisely, the target language, rather than strangeness *(Fremdheit),* should register what is strange *(das Fremde)* in the new formulations it is obliged to adopt. Respect for this strange element will be the touchstone of a good translation:

> Solange *nicht die Fremdheit, sondern das Fremde gefiihlt wird, hat die Übersetzung ihre höchsten Zwecke erreicht. Wo aber die Fremdheit an sich erscheint und vielleicht das Fremde verdunkelt, da verrat der Übersetzer, dass er seinem Original nicht gewachsen ist.*

When one follows the traditional tenet that the translator should express himself just as the original author would write in the translator's language, translation is destroyed as well as its benefit for both target language and nation.

The statement we termed "impossibilistic" (which denies that exact correspondence between two languages is possible) is no obstacle to the fact that translation is thus even more necessary for, as was said above, it broadens the conceptual and expressive possibilities of L2 and makes the contents of literature itself more fertile:

> *Das Übersetzen ist vielmehr eine der notwendigsten Arbeiten in einer Literatur.*

Translation offers those who do not know Ll unknown forms of art, although it first and foremost enriches lexical-semantic fields and resources. Humboldt speaks of *Bedeutsamkeit* and *Ausdrucksfähigkeit* with regard to his own language. To the same extent that the meaning of language is broadened, the meaning of a nation is also amplified. Thus, by combining the two situational approaches to translation — on the one hand, the difficulty of establishing accurate interlinguistic equivalence and, on the other, the pressing need for translation as an enriching element for the languages translated into — Humboldt deduced practical norms which guided his work. Obviously, fidelity to the target language (which he in this case termed *Deutschheit)* is imperative to any translation, although an endeavour to do justice to the latter should never betray the overall

nature of the original text. Translation must not be a commentary, so that there is no clear formulation for those instances in which the original text is obscure. The terminal text must not display qualities which the original text does not possess. Besides, passages in which the original may at first sight seem to be hermetic become transparent, both for translator and reader, once the translator empathises with the original:

> *Sowie man sich in die Stimmung des Dichters, seines Zeitalters, der von ihm aufgeführten Personen hineindenkt* (emphasis ours) *verschwindet sich nach und nach, und eine hohe Klarheit tritt an die Stelle.*

The reader cannot demand that what is sublime and gigantic in the original be easily comprehensible in the translation.

However, all the methodology and rules a translator may employ will be of no use unless he possesses "inspiration" and wit *(die erste gliickliche Eingebung),* a wit which must not give way to the so-called "aesthetic sense" which might tempt the translator.

As for the translation of poetic texts in verse, Humboldt advises metrical freedom -- and he here echoes Voss's opinion — for naturalness is preferable to beauty in metrical rhythm. On the other hand, he advocates the multiplicity of translations of the same text, for this will give several portraits of one and the same spirit. With regard to critical methodology, in the case of a diversity in original texts, he advises the translator to keep to one alone, for eclectic procedure in this sense could lead to a loss in the character of the text.

We should not do justice to Humboldt's translation theory if we failed to mention a passage from *Uber das Studium des Altertums und des griechischen insbesondere,* in which he considers the aims and uses of translation:

1) to make known the original to those who lack the relevant linguistic knowledge,
2) to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the text, and
3) to enter into the spirit of the work once one has mastered the words of same.

Of all these uses, the last is the most important, for the best translation is the one which destroys itself. The qualities a translation must display will depend on each of the above-mentioned aims to which one gives primacy. The translation that merely endeavours to make the work known to the reader will demand an adaptation to the linguistic levels of the latter, which will in certain cases entai1 a deviation from strict fidelity to the original text. When a knowledge of the text prevails, the translator must be govemed by literal fidelity, and in the third case he will have to sacrifice fidelity to meaning: *Treue des Geistes.*

This paper will allow neither space nor time for us to give a more detailed account of Humboldt's thinking on translation. The above data and remarks will suffice as a sample of both the theoretical and practical importance granted by this German pedagogue and first modem linguist to translation, his introduction to the *Agamemnon* being a classical testimony to his theory.

NOTE

All textual quotations used here are taken from the critical edition of Humboldt's work by Albert Leitzmann, *Cesammelte Schriften,* Leipzig, 1906.