CHRISTOPHER MACLEHOSE

A Publisher's Vision

Knowing the work of translators to be meticulous, infinitely painstaking, and one of ceaseless and intense concentration, I very much like Anthea Bell's metaphor of the trapeze artist.[1] It is so much more apt than Pushkin's familiar description of translators as the carthorses of civilisation. In Pushkin's time the load of the translator was perhaps much heavier. Nowadays it is necessarily lighter for all but a few, and threatens to be lighter still.

When Manya Harari and Marjorie Villiers founded the Harvill Press in 1946 after working together on the Russian Desk in the Foreign Office during the war, they gave their reason for doing so as wanting to do what they could to restore the bridges that had been lost between cultures in World War Two. Ever since I read that declaration in their first catalogue, I have thought of translation houses as builders of bridges. Now I shall think of them as beneath, and in a remote way supporting, the translators above.

At Harvill I have tried to find a translator of seventy summers or more, scholars for whom high wires over the Niagara were a thing of the past. Why so senior? The translation of the mere language is presumably but a quarter of the work and the more experienced and more deeply read a translator is in the literature of the

source language—as well as aware of the day-to-day ways and social and political history—the more readily he or she will recognise the landscape of literary and quotidian memory behind the language, the invisible veins beneath the surface of a text.

Joan Tate, the exceptional ambassador fo

behind the book the author is now writing, and sometimes four at a time, not necessarily in languages the author can easily read. By then the writer's freedom to devote his or her days, weeks even, to an English translation may simply have run out, and by then it must be hoped that he has a sufficient trust in his translator and his publisher's editors that he can leave his former part in the finalising of the English text to them—this in spite of how important in other parts of the publishing world the English text can be. It will rarely be used as a basis for further translation, but it is often a reference, or used as a means of reading, sometimes making a decision on a book, by publishers abroad.

It seems to me certainly desirable that a translator open a line to the author, and keep it always open. Whether it is a crucial line may depend on the level of the author's English, but I don't remember a single case in which the time taken to establish communication with an author was time wasted. On the other hand I remember many cases where a failure to do so has led to grief. One remembers too a strange virus that—mericifully rarely—afflicts translators: that the authors whose books they have admired without reservation at the beginning of the work become *bêtes noires*, sometimes detested. At times, but not always, this leads to a translator opting not to take on the author's next book. In an ideal world, an author will tell a publisher that the translator must never be replaced. A long association of the one's work with the other's is unquestionably valuable. Richard Ford once told me that he regarded his exchanges with his translators as sacred texts, and no-one doubts that a translator reads a work more closely, more

spent months checking and repairing the

was startled then—and not only at the imbalance—I am by now the more surprised after years in the interim of watching Scandinavian languages grow, so to speak, as they arrive into English. This remains the oddest conundrum among the many that twenty-five years of working with translators has thrown up. And in all of that time I have watched translators struggle against the more serious glaciers of the almost untranslateable.

Are some texts untranslateable? Russian poetry is very often held by Russians to be beyond translation. Is it yet worth the attempt? I would always say yes, but Joseph Brodsky—on an evening organised by Bill Swainson in the Queen Elizabeth Hall filled to the rafters, to mark the centenary of Osip Mandlestam's birth—greeted every poem read (beautifully) in English by Seamus Heaney with the vigorous assertion that it was not, and then declaimed the originals. The translaieaho had come from Californiaofor theoevent, chos not to go to the celebratory dinner.

Three translations in recent years at Harvill have been quarrelled with that I remembebToand one or two othrs have been sniped at by reviewers. One translation was disavowed by the authobToaho, had thre been an appropriate communication with the translatorToaould certainly havemendedoahat were judged infelicities or errors. One was of the Brazilian novelist Ana Miranda's *Bay of All Saints and Every Conceivable Sin* by Giovanni Pontiero, a text in English which was occasionally accused of havingoerred in tone.[4] It is a long book that must have been a vast struggle to render into English at a consistent tension and ahich did manage to read beautifully in English throughout. My belief is now that the translator had made a decision as to how, in terms of tone, he would convey the spirit and the music of the original, and was criticised for all the grace-notes his choice required him to discard. Pontiero won the first Independent Foreign Fiction Award with José Saramago for his translation of

The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis, a work which he magnificently championed.[5] He also, with Saramago's insistent blessing, recreated a translation that had been savaged by an American editor and published in that flawed form.

The English and American translations of *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (called *Smilla's Sense of Snow* in the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition) have many differences.[6] Tiina Nunnally, the American translator and herself a winner of the Independent Foreign Fiction Award with Per Olov Enquist's *The Visit of the Royal Physician,*[7] as of other notable awards, took a view about Peter Høeg's deliberate stylistic complexities, polishing away many express awkwardnesses which the Danish publisher and the author worked long and hard to restore in the Harvill edition (which sold more than a million copies). The variations have only been remarked in two essays on translation practice and hardly anyone has wondered at the decision of the American publisher to drop the essential "Miss" from the title. Nothing to do with translation theory, apparently, only a sensible way of not having (feminist) bricks through your (14th floor) windows. Miss Smilla would have ha (gto

(Georges Perec), to Margaret Jull Costa (several), to George Bird (Andrey Kurkov), to Robert Chandler (Andrey Platonov), to the novelist James Buchan (Golshiri's *The Prince* to be published in the autumn of 2005), and to John Crowfoot (Emma Gerstein) Harvill owes the impetus to have acquired some of their best authors. Roger Straus typically rejoiced to tell the story of the advice he had from Susan Sontag, his long-time author and counsellor, who had warmly commended that he publish both Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Salvatore Satta's *The Day of Judgment*.[8] Yes, he said, but if I had space only for one? Satta, she told him, and in my view rightly.

In recent years the best of the readers inside Harvill have been Guido Waldman and Euan Cameron, translators both. Before them, Harry Willetts famously read for Harvill in fourteen languages. He once sent back a book after some months, regretting that he had not after all had the necessary time—not the time to read the book, it turned out, but the time to learn the language, which was Danish. Willetts was the favoured translator of Solzhenitsyn, and when invited by the author to retranslate *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* he said that it would be a privilege to make what could nevertheless only be the second best translation of the work.[9] The best—unmatchably, he said—was the Welsh.

A publishing house has to stand for something, be recognisable to its readers, the collectors of its books, to its potential authors and of course to booksellers, to other publishers and agents. And you have to go on striving to burnish that for which you stand, to be known only for what is excellent—as Faber's poetry list is. In an article in the

same token, what you do not publish is as important as what you do. When you are willing to consider books from a great many languages it is of inestimable value to be able to depend upon the discreet wisdom of your own authors and translators, your regular correspondents the publishers and critics in Europe, the best readers in all the languages you need.

Famously, and no-one who discusses the business of translating fiction forgets them, some translated novels have become huge bestsellers: *The Name of the Rose*, Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*, Peter Høeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, and to a lesser extent Haruki Murakami novels—his *Norwegian Wood* sold several millions of copies in Japan—Milan Kundera's

English as a second language the world over. What seems to me likely to happen in the short term is that the devoted publishers of other literatures will be driven back into a kind of cultural ghetto from which the irreducible readership for foreign literature in English will be able to order what they need from the internet and from a handful of real bookshops. The occasional runaway bestseller will emerge into the chain bookshops, but for the most part now the majority of even the finest books that are translated find their way to sales of between 1,500 and 6,000.

A healthier climate for the sales of translated literature would depend upon the willingness and freedom of the managers of chain bookshops to stock the works of European writers, the willingness too to display them on their prominent tables and in their windows without demanding a premium (all this held true barely six years ago). Not so very long ago Tim Waterstone, the C.E.O. of his bookshop chain, and Terry Maher, the C.E.O. of the rival Dillons chain, both demanded of their managers that they stock and actively sell *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. Not so very long ago, but impossible to imagine happening today. An improved climate will also need the persistent attention of literary editors and their best reviewers.

One long-serving literary editor once gave this response to my wife's question for a research paper for the French Ministry of Culture: "I do not feel that it is a part of my job to inform the readers of the *Daily Telegraph* about books translated from French.…" The *Guardian* books pages have never been more extensive than they are now, the *Independent* and the *T.L.S.*

Magris' *Danube* gave that book and that author's subsequent work a significant start in this country. On the other hand, the failure of the English press to review the first edition of W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* was as baffling as it was shameful.[11] That book sold, after a slow start, because other authors, having found their own way to it, claimed it as their book of the year. The *Times* steadfastly refused to accept a review from one of their leading critics. A. S. Byatt, Julia Neuberger and Anita Brookner were among those writers whose belief in the book led to the beginnings of an immense and deserved literary reputation and a considerable commercial success.

As to reviewers and translations: Gabriel Jospovici, in a long and carping discussion of the translation of *Life A User's Manual* managed to criticise David Bellos for the "translation" of all of the direct quotations from James Joyce that were hidden in the text. Too many reviewers take similar pains to be just that much cleverer than the translator. Anthea Bell says that "if reviewers don't comment on a translation, it has worked."[12] Although reviewers almost invariably comment

the Wolffs the work of Pasternak and Lampedusa's *The Leopard*),[13] kept alive, for as long as their houses survived, the working assumption that what was written in other languages should be taken as seriously as anything written in English. It is hard to imagine that any one of these publishers would have rejected a book as being "too French," "too German," "too Russian," as happens now only too often to European publishers when they offer a book outside a very small circle of British or American publishers, among them Drenka Willen at Harcourt, the successor to Helen Wolff, and two translator publishers: Jonathan Galassi of Farrar, Straus and Carol Janeway of Knopf. Nor, among the independent small houses should the Dalkey Archive Press, New Directions, or Seven Stories be overlooked.

The experience of English or American publishers offering their books to Europeans is strikingly different. The appetite of German and Dutch houses is astonishing; the proportion of Sweden and Finland's publications that are translations of American and English authors must be held alarming. There is, it seems, and in other European countries, an almost toxic dependence on Anglo-Saxon commercial fiction.

The bridges that the founders of the Harvill Press set out to rebuild seem not to be in such good repair today. Between all the other cultures and languages in Europe the lines are by contrast strong, but if only three per cent of the books published in Britain each year are translations, compared to c.26% in France—and that includes all the kinds of books, children's books, cookery books, etc. and academic texts, as well as literature—you can take the view that Britain is deliberately absenting itself from European literary cultures, or you could take the view that within that wretched three per cent are the very best books that Europe (and all the other languages of the world) has to offer. It may also follow that the publishing house that devotes itself to

translations—however excellent their authors and their translators—will not, unless there is a sea change, flourish. Yet it obviously matters immeasurably to British cultural life that translations be made of the best books of world literature—not only new ones but retranslations of classics—and that there be stimulated, in the first place by government, a climate within which translated literature will thrive.

Notes

[1] See this issue, Anthea Bell, "Translation as Illusion."
[2] Claudio Magris, *Danube*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Collins Harvill, 1989).
[3] Henrik Tikkanen, *Snobs' Island*