



Jiří Levý. *The Art of Translation*. Trans. Patrick Corness. Edited with a critical foreword by Zuzana Jettmarová. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2011, xxviii, 322 p.

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La traduction à l'épreuve de l'écriture : poétiques et expérimentations

At the crossroads of translating and writing: Poetics and experiments

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in Chapter 1—would have produced a clearer historical sense of the projects of translation and of the debates surrounding them. And although the author does refer to tracts and other Christian publications, a more temporally focused approach would have made it possible to make greater use of them. John Murdoch, in his *Catalogue of the Christian Vernacular Literature of India* (1870; not 1970 as indicated in the bibliography), listed for Tamil 738 tracts, 248 books and 19 periodicals—a rich trove that still largely remains to be explored and whose analysis would most certainly have given even greater substance and depth to the author’s study.

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Jiří Levý. *The Art of Translation*. Trans. Patrick Corness. Edited with a critical foreword by Zuzana Jettmarová. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2011, xxviii, 322 p.

I first bought a copy of Jiří Levý’s *Umění překladu* [*The Art of Translation*] at the Academia bookshop in Prague in 1998, the year it was re-issued in the Czech Republic after the fall of Communism. A classic Czech text on translation, first published in 1963, the issues it enunciated seemed metaphorically akin to the bookshop, whose first floor bustled with tourists skirting around the Czech literature section (in many languages) and whose second-floor was devoted to scientific and theoretical literature for the arts and sciences. Levý produced a book that was not “dry-as-dust theory,” thanks to his well-illustrated explanations that were not “addressed to experts but to a broad community of interested readers” (Hausenblas, cited in Levý, p. ix). Yet Levý’s functionalist and erudite approach also appealed to cultural and translation scholars, including Itamar Even-Zohar, Gideon Toury and José Lambert (p. xvii), and impacted their thinking about new and contemporary translation theories. *The Art of Translation* has now been translated into English, excellently, by Patrick Corness for John Benjamins, with a lucid introduction by Zuzana Jettmarová, who emphasizes its importance not only for understanding the “international historiography of the discipline” but also for what it can still contribute to “current discussion” (p. xxv).

The book includes a survey of the discipline to the early 1960s when the book was initially published, with Levý emphasizing the international nature of it, pointing out both the variance in national traditions and norms of translation, but also pointing to the future in elucidating what could be gained from understanding and comparing these traditions and norms transnationally and transhistorically. He gives practical advice to translators in sections on drama translation and verse translation, as well as, importantly, arguing for a new mode of translation research and criticism that would move beyond identifying mistakes in the target text and infidelities to the source text, and anticipating, among others, Doug Robinson's denunciation of "normative structures of equivalence" (Robinson, 1998, p. 92). In four particular areas, Levý's book—even 50 years later—opens up avenues for further discussion and research: in thinking about translation as an art; in thinking about the translator as a reader; in thinking about the reader of translations; and, finally, dotted here and there in his book which he always called "notes on a theory" rather than a theory (p. ix), an interesting correlation between translation and Stanislavsky's theories on acting.

Levý's book emphasizes the "creative individuality" of the translator (p. 14), his or her "noetic compatibility" (p. 19) with the author, and the task of translating "the ideo-aesthetic content" of the author's work (p. 25). "Apprehension of the ideo-aesthetic values of individual verbal means and partial motifs facilitates apprehension of artistic wholes," according to Levý, who continues: "the artistic education of translators should incorporate efforts to replace their psychological short-cut 'source text—target text' approach with a more demanding process, which is the only one of artistic value, that is 'source text—imagined reality—target text'" (p. 34). To do this, literary translators need an "artistic education" (*ibid.*) as well as a practical one, an education in which they become an expert in the literature, authors, as well as the literary and translation traditions from and into which they translate. Such literary expertise allows for creativity and imagination because trained reader-cum-translators can recognize and re-articulate the "ideo-aesthetics" (*ibid.*) of the text they meet.

“The translator is first of all a reader” (p. 27), writes Levý, and he explores the delicate balance the translator has to tread between concretizing the meaning of a text as a reader and not over-interpreting the meaning for the target-language reader. But he argues that “a good translator adopts, usually consciously, a particular interpretative position and forms a clear idea of the message the translation is to convey to the reader” (p. 43); the translator’s ethical position as a reader and interpreter, however, is to be sensitive to those “ideological and aesthetic values expressly or latently inherent in the work itself” (p. 44), rather than imposing his or her own subjective agenda. For Levý, this is the norm to be applied—that of “veracity” to the ideo-aesthetic of the text (p. 61).

Readers, too, Levý infers, need to understand what translation is and what the translator does; if the “maturity of the translation method” is important then so is “the maturity of the readers. A perfect translation would require not only an ideal translator but also an ideal reader” (p. 71), Levý argues. While his reader is a precursor of Umberto Eco’s “model reader” (Eco, 1979, pp. 7-11), Levý’s is a more concrete version, an addressee actively participating in the interpretative strategies of the text, the making of the text. Pre-dating Eco by more than a decade, Levý, however, also pictures a method of empirical training for such readers. Levý points to an important and undertheorized element of the translation process: the reader. In addition, he underlines the need to train readers to understand what translation is and what it does. Levý’s thoughts in this area were indeed avant-garde in the early 1960s, which was confirmed by the theme of the Canadian Association for Translation Studies 2011 Conference: “Reading(s), Rereading(s) and Translation,” one of the goals of which was to theorize the reader and reading in the translation process.

The necessity to train readers to understand translation extends to critics. Levý suggests that to escape the trap of the usual bromides, the “stereotypical statements on the aptness or the fluency of the translation” (p. 16), translation “analysis [...] often requires highly refined methods, because one is dealing with details which are significant, although they are often difficult to

discern” (p. 173). He adds that it is the small “deviations from the source which can best reveal the translator’s artistic method and his view of the work he is translating” (*ibid.*). He also notes the importance of taking into account translator’s writings on their translation practice (prefaces, statements and correspondence) to understand the impact of translators and their thoughts on the texts they produce. Their writings were paratexts that he felt were often ignored by literary critics (p. 179).

Intriguing, too, is Levý’s characterization of translation as being the art form that is nearest to acting. He underlines the performativity of the process, akin to that of an actor interpreting and speaking his lines but who also “autonomously produces physical action not specified in his script” (p. 57). He argues that Stanislavsky’s method of actor training could help a translator to “discover the sub-text and develop his powers of imagination” (p. 36) and stay clear, like actors relying on stock acting techniques, of “stereotyped solutions” for difficult elements of the translation. Just as Stanislavsky warned one of his actresses not just to show off her legs to get attention, the translator should be wary of over-performing (p. 81).

Patrick Corness and Zuzana Jettmarová should be commended not only for bringing Levý to an English readership, but also for enacting what Levý envisaged: an informed, erudite translation and introduction, that engages with and reveals theories important to the history of translation theory and contemporary Translation Studies.

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