Introduction: The Quest for the Perfect Translation

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In thinking about the various essays and articles included in this volume, I have been tempted to call this preface by several different names. First I thought of entitling it "Armchair Ruminations on the Art of Translation" in honor of those English philosophers who engaged in "armchair linguistics" in the 1950s. Then, to paraphrase Eliot, I came up with "To Criticize the (Translation) Critic", since much of what appears in this volume is, in one way or another, concerned with the criticism of translations. Finally, however, it seemed to me that the best title was "The Quest for the Perfect Translation," which corresponds roughly to "The Pot of Gold at the End of the Rainbow."

The titles are not merely facetious, as will become clear in the course of the following remarks. Translation theorists, translators and translation critics are all actively engaged on a spiritual and intellectual adventure, in which the Holy Grail that they are seeking is knowledge, as precious as the golden fleece and as maddeningly impossible to discover as the philosopher's stone. What perhaps is sometimes not clearly discerned is the importance of serendipity; on a quest, one never finds what one is looking for (which like a mirage eludes one's grasp); the mythical pot of gold remains mythical, as the rainbow recedes further and further; but many interesting adventures are to be had along the way, and many delightful discoveries are to be made, on the unexpected bypaths of the journey.

It is perhaps time to leave aside metaphor for the moment. What the individual authors in this volume seem to be searching for is the perfect translation, or (in a related effort) the perfect translation theory; thus, when they perceive imperfections or a theoretical lacuna or vagueness of formulation, they become annoyed or even choleric and extract their poisoned arrows from their quills for the ultimate act of revenge and retribution. To the critic, it would seem, translating badly is a worse sin than fornication to a Puritan.

It may, however, be doubted whether there will ever be such a thing as a perfect translation (or, analogously, a perfect translation theory). It seems probable that one can only postulate a perfect rendering as a hypothetical ideal, a utopian model which offers a perspective from which to analyze and judge actual performances. While, however, it is perfectly fair to clarify all the complexities of a text and the difficulty of reproducing all its nuances in another language, it seems ungenerous to concentrate only on the failings of the translator, without recognizing the good qualities embodied in his or her work and the inevitable shortcomings that are bound to beset the efforts of even the most conscientious practitioner of this ancient art of linguistic transfer. Some writers even appear to assume that a perfect translation can, or could, exist, whereas in actuality imperfection is inherent in the art.

For their part, Neubert and Viaggio seem engaged on an ultimately quixotic endeavour to elaborate a complete and unified translation theory. Their efforts recall those of twentieth-century physicists who have striven mightily to work out a unified mathematical theory of the four basic forces of nature, on the principle that in nature there must needs be a basic unity of form and structure. The quest for unity is, perhaps, a constant tension in every human undertaking aimed at a comprehensive understanding of the world given to us for our contemplation. It is the search for a "theory of everything": even should it ultimately fail, it will still have hatched a somewhat more modest, but also useful, "theory of something."
The contents of this volume are quite varied and lively. The topics covered can, however, be grouped into a few large categories. Some authors are concerned with translation theory (or translation practice in general). Others undertake to write reviews of actual translations. And one article deals with aspects of the teaching of translation.

In the field of theory, Albrecht Neubert gives an overview of types of translation models and discusses their relative merits. Tim Parks reviews some theories of literary translation and then offers some examples of his own approach (engaging also in some translation criticism). Further discussion of theoretical issues is to be found in the exchange of letters between Sergio Viaggio and Peter Newmark. In addition, Sergio Viaggio has written a provocative essay on the differences between translators and interpreters and the kind of work they do. He wonders if these two unlike breeds of animal can be friends. The answer had better be a resounding yes, as sometimes the same person is both a translator and an interpreter (Viaggio himself is a case in point).

Some articles deal with specific issues of translation practice, without, however, referring to any one text in particular. Thus, Domenico Stewart discusses the ways in which the Italian subjunctive can be translated into English; Inga Shchekina deals with the problems faced in rendering the communicative intent of a text in going from Italian into Russian or vice versa; Michèle Fourment-Berni looks at the issue of the translation (or non-translation) of proper names.

Many articles are reviews of specific translations, and hence fall into the general category of translation criticism. The actual concerns, however, are quite varied. Some deal with literary texts. Jane Dunnett, for example, reviews Gianni Celati's version of London's The Call of the Wild; Maria Teresa Musacchio analyzes the Italian translations of John Fowles' The Collector; Clara Villoresi examines the Italian version of a German novel, Die Klosterschule by Barbara Frischmuth; Anna Giambagli reviews the Italian translation of the novel Yann Andréa Steiner by Marguerite Duras; and Pérrette-Cécile Buffaria presents short articles on two translations: one from French into Italian of the Mémoires of Goldoni and the other from Italian into French of 'I Solfisti' (a philosophical work) by Mario Untersteiner.

Both Buffaria (for the Mémoires) and Giambagli also present interviews with the translators, thus offering first-hand information on translation procedures and realities.

Curiously enough, two pieces of translation criticism have food as their subject. Federica Scarpa takes a close look at the Italian translations (and adaptations) of food and cooking terms used by Shakespeare, while John Dodds has provided an amusing (or is it disconcerting?) compendium of "horrors" found in Italian menus. This may serve as a reminder that, while eating is a universal habit, the things eaten are culturally determined; hence the related terminology is quite culture-specific.

Other writers deal with technical translation. Domenico Cosma-discusses the problems of finding Italian equivalents for German terms used in trade-union manuals. Elisabeth Koenraads looks at the translation of an instruction manual from Italian into Dutch. And Clara Villoresi, after a general review of the problems of machine translation, examines some machine-produced texts with a critical eye.

Finally, there is one essay by Luciana Allocco Bianco on the analysis and classification of student errors, made while translating from Italian into French.

The argument between Newmark and Viaggio seems to turn mainly on differing views of literal translation. Fundamentally, the two authors seem to have even different definitions of what literal translation entails, with the result that they often seem to be writing at cross-purposes. This is not the place to go into all the details of their differing stances; the present exchange of letters, however, grows out of a long article by Sergio Viaggio that appeared in the previous issue of RITT, criticizing Newmark's positions (see Bibliography). The issues raised are, in general, of considerable theoretical interest.

For some time, literal translation has suffered from a bad press. One reason for this may lie in the ambiguity of the term. There are, so far as I know, no clear and unequivocal definitions of the term. It is usually glossed as "word-for-word" translation, but no one in his right mind has ever attempted exactly that, except, perhaps, as a didactic or humorous exercise. I remember that when I was studying Latin my teacher would require us to
translate "literally" to see if we understood the structure of the original. So even a very simple Latin sentence, say, *Puer puellae rosam dat*, would come out very strangely in English (maybe, in this case, "The boy to the girl the rose gives"). And even that is not strictly "literal", because articles (which Latin does not possess) have been added. Clearly, if this is what is meant by literal translation, no one has ever practiced it. When translating from German into English, one simply does not say (except as a joke), "I have all the supper eaten."

It should be equally clear that this is not what is meant when literal translation is recommended. Given that a literal translation is possible only when the languages in question have similar surface structures (it is difficult to imagine what could be meant by a literal translation from Chinese into English), the position seems to be that some attention, at least, should be paid to the form of the original utterance; that it is not only the underlying meaning which needs to be conveyed, but also (insofar as reasonably possible) the specific form of the utterance, since that form also contributes in some way to the meaning (perhaps most directly in determining the ordering of elements, the positioning of theme and rhyme, the use of cohesive devices, etc.). Obviously, interpreters are less concerned with such aspects of discourse; their effort is directed mainly at rendering the "gist" of a speech as clearly and concisely as possible. But the translator of a written text may wish to operate distinctions that would be unimportant for the interpreter. One might postulate, as the literalist's overall stance, a sort of Occam's razor of translation: *viz., that no more changes than absolutely necessary should be made in the form of the text.* That is, of two translations that equally well convey the meaning of the original text, that one is to be preferred which is closer to the form of the original. As Hooker (quoted in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*) put it so long ago, "Of both translations, the better I acknowledge that which cometh nearer to the very letter of the very original verity." (Johnson 1979) This is, in effect, tantamount to what Newmark is saying when he writes that "provided that equivalent-effect is secured, the literal word-for-word translation is not only the best, it is the only valid method of translation" (Newmark 1981: 39). The principle is clear, though the proviso may be a very great one.

In fact, the problem with Nabokov’s translation of Pushkin (quotation by Viaggio to refute Newmark’s claim for literal translation) is, quite simply, that equivalence of effect, a *sine qua non* of any rendering, has not been respected or "secured". No discussion of the rightness or wrongness of literal translation can even begin until this indispensable condition has been met.

The details of their dispute can best be studied in the context of their correspondence. In general one can say that Viaggio and Newmark are mainly concerned here with how one should translate. Their discussion thus falls halfway between theory and practice. The problem with this prescriptive approach is that the factors determining the translation of any text are so complex that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to lay down universally valid guidelines. The best that one can hope to achieve is to illuminate the problems and suggest some possible solutions.

In his provocative essay, "Translators and Interpreters: Can They Be Friends?" Sergio Viaggio further makes an impassioned plea in defense of theory as an essential element in the preparation and on-going training of any translator or interpreter. He also points out some of the main differences between these two professional activities, and lists some of the requisites for each. While at times he seems unduly harsh in his judgments ("Most of us, unfortunately, are blissfully unaware of the vast progress made by the relatively few of our colleagues who have actually meditated in the bathtub," he writes (page 30)), his essay is a salutary reminder that much still needs to be done to make translation a "scientific" discipline, and not just an art picked up as best one can amidst the preoccupations of practical living.

Tim Parks, in his essay "Rethinking the Task of the Translator", starts by reviewing some current theories of literary translation, which he finds shrouded in mysticism, "that continual appeal to pieties and imponderables (...) which so often disguises some dubious political agenda, or merely the translator's age-old fear of invisibility." (page 44) He rightly asserts that any theory of literary translation must be of some practical utility and must relate to actual texts. He identifies the conflict between fluency and fidelity as the main problem for the translator, and focuses his
attention on the difficulties involved in rendering into another language precisely those instances of the use of a language that depart in some significant way from standard usage. As he writes, he wishes to "demonstrate that faithfulness is by no means a dull thing, but a dynamic process that requires infinite sensibility and resourcefulness." (page 42) In his view, the translator's freedom is limited by his need to be faithful to the intentions of the original text. But this does not mean that the translator does not have an important role. "What higher status should a translator require than the feeling that he has carried out this immensely complicated task well?" he asks (page 42). There are, however, inherent limitations imposed on the translator by the nature of different languages, which may not be able to use words in similar ways to produce similar effects. So, in some cases, "it may be wise to decide not to translate." (page 44) This is precisely the point where I differ with Tim Parks. It seems to me clear that, even if a perfect rendering of the style and intentions of a text may not always be possible - or is it really ever possible? - still, there is always something to be gained from a translation, however imperfect. Joyce's 'Ulysses' may not be quite satisfactorily in Italian, because the type of word play it engages in is natural to English and unnatural in Italian; but a fair idea of Joyce's world can still be had from it. (The same may be said, even more cogently, of 'Finnegans Wake'. Joyce uses language the way a poet does, so one needs to approach the translation of his work as one would the translation of an epic poem, such as 'The Odyssey', no perfect translation of which exists in English or, perhaps, any modern language.) To require perfect translatability before consenting to the enterprise at all is to chase after a mirage that, however near it may seem, is always beyond our reach (though not beyond our ken). As Newmark affirms, "...An effective, if approximate, translation of any text into any language is always possible." (Newmark 1981: 54)

Albrecht Neubert, in his article "Translation as Text", speaks about the different models of translation to be found in the literature. As he points out, "In translation studies the potential for misunderstanding is not just the result of a divergence of research interest. (...) It is also the result of a failure to clarify the research parameters active when a complex subject of study is partitioned for research purposes." (page 63) He then proceeds to clarify such parameters by defining and discussing the different models of translation: the critical model, the practical model, the linguistic model, the text-linguistic model, the sociocultural model, the computational model, and the psycholinguistic model. Since he is concerned with synchronic descriptions of the translation process and results, he naturally does not deal with such topics as the history and sociology of translation, the teaching of translation, or the use of translation as a teaching tool in language instruction. (En passant, one could include in the sociology of translation such matters as: what books does a given society choose to translate, and why? what impact have translations had on a given society? what is the status of translators in a given society? etc.)

The object of Neubert's quest is an "integrated theory of translation." He feels Newmark is too drastic when he says that such a theory is not feasible. He writes: "An integrated approach requires an integrating concept. We have proposed the text as an integrating concept." (page 64) He then distinguishes three types of text: the source text, the target text and the virtual translation, which he defines as "a composite of the possible relations between a source text and a range of potential target texts." (page 64)

Neubert's discussion is an important contribution to the development of a unified theory of translation, also because he can see and appreciate the merits of all the different models and approaches and take from each what it has to offer. As a matter of fact, the variety of points of view, while healthy and stimulating, has sometimes led to confusion over what translation theory can really hope to achieve. It seems unlikely that any general theory will ever be able to propose specific guidelines for the translation of actual texts; the formulation of "rules" seems to be an ad hoc, text-specific type of activity (or specific to types of texts, perhaps). What a general theory can provide is a description of what actually happens in the translation process and in the realized end product.

And just as the invention of computers has led to new insights into the functioning of the brain, so too the application of computers to translation has led to a new appreciation of the complexities of the translation process. A machine, if it is to translate at all, must have available a very detailed and
explicit set of rules regarding semantics, stylistics and much else; from this point of view, a study of what computers can and cannot do (and how they do it) helps to illumine the ways in which human translators also work, as the article by Clara Villaresi makes clear.

Quite commonly, translation scholars assume that the source text and the target text are (or should be) equivalent forms of the same text. Clearly, this is not the case. In translation, one text is replaced by another text; the substitution is not arbitrary only because (1) the target text is derived from the source text; (2) the target text is related to the source text in a number of complex, systematic ways; and (3) the target text is usually held to convey the same meaning as the source text, or to perform the same communicative or expressive function. Each text, however, is independent (if a target text cannot be read and understood without reference to the source text, it is not really a translation in this sense, but merely a gloss on the original). Thus it is not exact to say that one has read *I promessi sposi* in English, since *I promessi sposi* exists as a text only in Italian; one may read *The Betrothed* in English, in someone's translation, but that is not quite the same thing. A translation is never the same as the original, and an infinite number of translations of a text are possible. It is therefore useless to look for the "perfect" translation that corresponds "perfectly" to the linguistic features of the original, because such a beast has never existed and never will. It is a commonplace to say that something is always lost in translation; what is perhaps more interesting to note is that, even in the worst of translations, something of the original is always conveyed. Translation is always a net gain for the world of ideas and culture. I would go so far as to say that a bad translation is still better than no translation at all. Of course, our effort as translators, theorists, critics and teachers of translation is to make the end result as good as humanly possible, and never to be content with approximate equivalence if a full (or nearly full) rendering of the text's semantics and stylistics can be achieved.

This is also the task of translation criticism. Many of the articles in this volume fall into this category; they attempt to criticize, and hence improve, published translations of given texts. There are, however, a number of pitfalls in this activity. One of them is that very often the criteria being used to criticize the translation are not made explicit, and may not be clear. (The problem is compounded when the translator has not worked on the basis of a cogent theory, as seems to be the case with Celati's translation of London, reviewed by Dunnett in this issue.) Every criticism implies and presupposes a theory of translation, even if it is not explicitly explained. Sometimes literal translation is taken as the tacit norm, so that any departure from what may be considered the obvious, literal translation must be justified. Sometimes the criteria refer mainly to the stylistic qualities of the target text (but the judgment of stylistic "quality" is necessarily impressionistic and subjective). In most cases attention is directed almost exclusively to various "lapses" or "defects" on the part of the translator, ignoring the fact that even the best of translations will inevitably contain such flaws. (To tell the truth, even originals may contain many flaws.) The critical approach usually proceeds by examining a few short passages taken as "interesting" by the critic. What has, so far, been lacking is the development of any critical methodology that would enable one to give an objective judgment of a given translated text as a whole. (Indeed, many journalistic reviews of translations are written without any reference to the original text.) Any evaluation of a translation's "equivalent effect" is of necessity subjective; to be feasible, such a judgment would have to be made by a perfectly bilingual person who had read both texts under similar conditions. Lacking any definite methodology, translation critics should therefore take to their task with great humility; it is only too easy to criticize, but in all fairness one should also look for the successful instances of translation (unless one wishes to maintain that no translation is ever successful), as Federica Scarpa has done in her essay on the translation of food and cooking expressions in the works of Shakespeare. Scarpa's comparative methodology is to be recommended also for future research aimed not so much at evaluation but at description of actual translation procedures. By putting alternative renderings side by side, one can weigh the relative merits and demerits of differing approaches, and also perceive more clearly the limits of any translation. Finally, if one argues that a given translation is wrong, one is in duty bound to suggest a better version.
The problems of translation criticism are particularly complex when one is dealing with literary translation, as in the articles by Tim Parks, Jane Dunnett, M.T. Musacchio, P.C. Buffaria, A. Giambaglì and C. Villaresi. A literary text is basically a *hapax legomenon*, i.e. an absolutely unique text, but, like an invented word that occurs nowhere else in the corpus of the language, it must be created in such a way as to be comprehensible; this necessity poses constraints on the freedom of invention and leads to a whole series of intertextual relations that embody the text's indebtedness to its sociocultural context and tradition. Thus the problem of literary translation is to render the text in such a way as to preserve its uniqueness (though technically violating it - perhaps one should actually speak of 'recreating' the text's uniqueness) while at the same time putting it in a context that will make it comprehensible to the reader of the target language. This context will certainly not coincide exactly with that of the original text, though the degree of difference or overlapping may vary considerably. Thus the rendering in another language, with another cultural tradition, inevitably poses delicate problems of equivalence, not so much in the conveyance of objective meanings as in portraying social relations (as in *The Collector* or recreating verbal inventiveness (as in Lawrence). It may be that in such cases there is no fully adequate solution, though a discussion of the problems is in any case illuminating and may (one hopes) lead to improvements in future translation attempts.

Translation has many features in common with other types of text production. After all, the translator is, in a certain obvious sense, a writer. But the interesting thing is to observe in what ways translation differs from other types of text production. In the case of translators who are also writers, it would be important to know how the modes of text production used when translating differ from those used in writing an original text. One explanation for both the virtues and the defects of translations produced by professional writers (such as Celati) might lie in the use made by such writers (when translating) of text production techniques more suitable for original text production.

It would be interesting to see if significant generalizations can be drawn from such accounts. Many translators, for instance, state that they begin with a literal translation, using that as the basis for further elaboration. (This is, for instance, what Paola Ranzini states (page 175) in the interview by P. C. Buffaria in this issue.) It would be fruitful to analyze and observe such procedures, in order to answer such questions as: What qualifies as a "literal translation" in the translator's mind? What kinds of changes are later made? In what order are they made? (First lexical substitutions, then syntactical modifications, or vice versa, etc.?) Is there a cause-effect relationship between different types of modifications? (For example, do lexical substitutions require syntactical changes?) At what point does the translator decide to put an end to the revision process, and why? To answer these questions would be to offer some insight not only for the translation theorist and the psychologist, but also for practicing translators and translation students. As Neubert remarks, "One important task of an empirical translation studies would be to observe practicing translators and examine the differences and similarities in the translation plans they put into practice." (Neubert & Shreve, 1992: 68).

The actual process of translation cannot be inferred from the end result, except in a very general way. The same result (finished translation) could presumably have been reached by different procedures. Conversely, the same process may lead to widely differing results in different cases. In actual fact, processes, procedures and results will be seen to vary infinitely as circumstances and the people involved also change. Translation is as messy and resistant to codification as life itself.

Let us return for a moment to the issue of writing vs. translating. One of the main differences between a writer and a translator lies in the motivation for the act of text production. A writer normally creates a text because he has something he very much wants to say; the text fulfills an expressive need of his. This is not the case with the translator who, qua translator, is not expressing any of his own thoughts or feelings (except insofar as the choice of text to be translated may be motivated by some ersatz expressive impulse). The translator's job is to express the author's ideas and personality, not his own, and to do so as competently and completely as
possible. Now, what may happen when a writer chooses to translate is that his own expressive needs intrude on the business of translation and influence not merely the choice of text, but also the choice of text production strategies. Thus, whether consciously or unconsciously, the text comes to be modified subtly in ways that make it expressive more of the translator's idiosyncratic world than of the original author's. This may give the resulting text an urgency and immediacy that it otherwise would not have, but it may also mean that the overall effect is considerably far from the spirit of the original. A case in point is Pound's handling of Chinese poetry. Sometimes a translation makes up for a shortcoming in the writer's own production. For example, a modern poet may wish to write an epic but may also be aware that epic poems are no longer possible; therefore, he chooses to translate a classic epic, trying to make it his own. This may be what happened also in the case of Pope's Homer. (Serious epic was already impossible in his day; both he and Byron wrote epics, but of a comic, satirical sort.) The line between this kind of translation and free "imitation" is very thin. Such an expressive use of translation by a creative writer is a sort of literary ventriloquism. This may, in fact, help to explain why an author is generally not the best translator of his own work - he is always subjecting it to the manipulation of a subsequent expressive need. Beckett's handling of Endgame is a case in point.

A writer may at times be "inspired" and thus not have completely conscious control over the composition process; a translator, on the other hand, is always in control of the text production process.

It is in pragmatic, commercial, "communicative" texts that the text production processes of the writer and the translator are most similar, since they are both following established conventions, combining standard patterns of expression according to fixed rules, in an almost mechanical way. Freedom for deviations from the norm is here at a minimum, although the translator may have to follow norms that are somewhat at variance with those held to by the original writer.

It may be observed that very often published translations exhibit certain tendencies, such as a general normalization of sentence structure and rhetorical patterns, a primary emphasis placed on meaning rather than form, a tendency to be explanatory and to paraphrase; at any rate, as has been frequently remarked, translations are more perishable than original texts, and, in the case of literary or philosophical works, need to be redone every generation. In rare cases, the translation may even improve the original. All of this, naturally, needs also to be kept in mind when teaching translation to students, though, as Luciana Allocco Blanco makes clear, students often have problems of expression at a much more basic level. Whereas translation theorists take language competence for granted, practicing teachers of translation (and even practicing translators) cannot afford this luxury, but have constantly to be refining their linguistic tools for the ever-changing world that offers itself to their attention.

In any case, translation is a basically optimistic enterprise. The translator always assumes - even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary - that translation is possible, and that he/she is competent to express, in another language, the thoughts and feelings of a man or woman he/she may never even have met, or who may have been dead for centuries.

In conclusion, one could argue that one of the strong points of this volume is that it offers a variety of glimpses at different texts (and text-types), with a description and critical appraisal of the different translation strategies used. As Neubert has remarked, "Translation scholars need to look at real translation practice. Translation reality is rarely studied. Instead, we have studied armchair conceptualizations of translation. What translation scholars need to do, and have started to do over the past decade, is focus on the varieties of translations that actually exist. They need to look at what happens to source texts during translation (...)" (Neubert & Shreve, 1992: 5-6).

In this connection, one might also enter a request for translators to offer more first-hand accounts of how they actually proceed in the work of translation, offering an analysis of the various stages of research, interpretation, expression and revision. The two interviews given in this volume could be followed by many others. It used to be that a translator's working methods could be to some extent reconstructed by examining his written notes and rewritings, but the use of word
processors leaves us with only the final result. Yet
not enough has so far been done to relate the
translation process to the polished end product.
Certainly translators work in a variety of
sometimes quite personal ways, but such
procedures are not random. And they must have
some effect on the quality of the result.

Finally, before closing these introductory
remarks, it may be salutary to recall that in
antique texts the word "translation" meant, in
general, "removal" (as Samuel Johnson glosses it
in his Dictionary); Donne uses the term to refer to
a person's passing on to the next life, and Johnson
quotes Wake as writing, "To go to heaven is to be
translated to that kingdom you have longed for; to
enjoy the glories of eternity." A translation of a
text is, in a specific sense, a removal of it from
one context, and the transporting of it to another;
it is, in that sense, to change the text, as we shall
all ourselves be changed hereafter. Perfect
equivalence between changed or transported
entities cannot exist. Transference means renewal,
the birth of something new. Perhaps the important
thing for a translator or a scholar to remember,
after all the sound and fury of the diatribes and
dilemmas have passed and the candle's wick is
short, is to maintain an attitude of humility
towards one's work, so that one can honestly say
that one has done one's best - no more, no less -
before the advent of the last translation.

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