

THE ART OF TRANSLATION

Samuel Johnson

The Idler 68/69 (1759)

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) foi um dos mais famosos críticos, ensaístas, poetas, jornalistas e lexicógrafos do século XVIII inglês. Em 1745, Johnson foi convidado, por um grupo de livreiros de Londres, para escrever um dicionário da língua inglesa, que ele veio a publicar em 1755. Esta obra de sucesso imediato continha 40,000 entradas, tendo o mérito de ser o primeiro dicionário da língua inglesa a incluir citações históricas.

O presente texto sobre tradução foi extraído de uma coluna, intitulada The Idler, que Johnson começou a escrever para a Universal Chronicle em 1759. Nesta consideração sobre a «Arte da Tradução», para além de um breve panorama histórico, o autor debate um velho tema que, desde os teóricos da tradução da Roma antiga, tem vindo a ser discutido até à actualidade: a liberdade e a literalidade ideais para que uma tradução possa atingir a sua «medida justa». Será interessante notar que, enquanto teóricos da tradução, como William Barnstone, não hesitariam hoje em dia concordar com a maioria das opiniões de Samuel Johnson, exceptuando a distinção clássica que valoriza o tradutor em detrimento do intérprete, outros, como por exemplo Antoine Berman, seguidor de uma tendência benjaminiana, inclinam-se a preferir as traduções que Johnson critica.

O texto, que aqui transcrevemos e traduzimos, é extraído de ROBINSON, Douglas (org.). Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche, Manchester (UK), St. Jerome Publishing, 1997, pp. 204-205.

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Among the studies which have exercised the ingenious and the learned for more than three centuries, none has been more diligently or more successfully cultivated than the art of translation; by which the impediments which bar the way to science are, in some measure, removed, and the multiplicity of languages become less incommodious.

Of every other kind of writing the ancients have left us models which all succeeding ages have laboured to imitate; but translation may justly be claimed by the moderns as their own. In the first ages of the world instruction was commonly oral, and learning traditional, and what was not written could not be translated. When alphabetical writing made the conveyance of opinions and the transmission of events more easy and certain, literature did not flourish in more than one country at once, or distant nations had little commerce with each other; and those few whom curiosity sent abroad in quest of improvement delivered their acquisitions in their own manner, desirous, perhaps, to be considered as the inventors of that which they had learned from others.

The Greeks for a time travelled into Egypt, but they translated no books from the Egyptian language; and when the Macedonians had overthrown the empire of Persia, the countries that became subject to Grecian dominion studied only the Grecian literature. The books of the conquered nations, if they had any among them, sunk into oblivion; Greece considered herself as the mistress, if not as the parent of arts, her language contained all that was supposed to be known, and, except the sacred writings of the Old Testament, I know not that the library of Alexandria adopted anything from a foreign tongue.

The Romans confessed themselves the scholars [students] of the Greeks, and do not appear to have expected what has since happened, that the ignorance of succeeding ages would prefer them to their teachers. Every man who in Rome aspired to the praise of literature thought it necessary to learn Greek, and had no need of versions when they could study the originals. Translation, however, was not wholly neglected. Dramatic poems could be understood by the people in no language but their own, and the Romans were sometimes entertained with the tragedies of Euripides and the comedies of Menander. Other works were sometimes attempted; in an old scholiast there is mention of a Latin *Iliad*, and we have not wholly lost Tully's version of the poem of Aratus; but it does not appear that any man grew eminent by interpreting another, and perhaps it was more frequent to translate for exercise or amusement than for fame.

The Arabs were the first nation who felt the ardour of translation; when they had subdued the eastern provinces of the Greek empire, they found their captives wiser than themselves, and made haste to relieve their wants by imparted knowledge. They discovered that many might grow wise by the labour of a few, and that improvements might be made with speed, when they had the knowledge of former ages in their own language. They, therefore, made haste to lay hold on medicine and phi-

The art of translation

losophy, and turned their chief authors into Arabic. Whether they attempted the poets is not known; their literary zeal was vehement, but it was short, and probably expired before they had time to add the arts of elegance to those of necessity.

The study of ancient literature was interrupted in Europe by the irruption of the Northern nations, who subverted the Roman empire, and erected new kingdoms with new languages. It is strange that such confusion should suspend literary attention; those who lost, and those who gained dominion, had immediate miseries to redress, and had little leisure, amidst the violence of war, the trepidation of flight, the distresses of forced migration, or the tumults of unsettled conquest, to inquire after speculative truth, to enjoy the amusement of imaginary adventures, to know the history of former ages, or study the events of any other lives. But no sooner had this chaos of dominion sunk into order, than learning began again to flourish in the calm of peace. When life and possessions were secure, convenience and enjoyment were soon sought, learning was found the highest gratification of the mind, and translation became one of the means by which it was imparted.

At last, by concurrence of many causes, the European world was roused from its lethargy; those arts which had been long obscurely studied in the gloom of monasteries became the general favourites of mankind; every nation vied with its neighbour for the prize of learning; the epidemical emulation spread from south to north, and curiosity and translation found their way to Britain.

He that reviews the progress of English literature will find that translation was very early cultivated among us, but that some principles, either wholly erroneous or too far extended, hindered our success from being always equal to our diligence.

Chaucer, who is generally considered the father of our poetry, has left a version of Boethius on the *Comforts of Philosophy*, the book which seems to have been the favourite of the middle ages, which had been translated into Saxon by King Alfred, and illustrated with a copious comment ascribed to Aquinas. It may be supposed that Chaucer would apply more than common attention to an author of so much celebrity, yet he has attempted nothing higher than a version strictly literal, and has degraded the poetical parts to prose, that the constraint of versification might not obstruct his zeal for fidelity.

Caxton taught us typography about the year 1474. The first book printed in English was a translation. Caxton was both the translator and the printer of the *Destruction of Troye* [by Raoul Lefevre], a book which, in that infancy of learning, was considered as the best account of the fabulous ages, and which, though now driven out of notice by authors of no greater use or value, still continued to be read in Caxton's English to the beginning of the present century.

Caxton proceeded as he began, and, except the poems of Gower and Chaucer, printed nothing but translations from the French, in which the

original is so scrupulously followed that they afford us little knowledge of our own language: though the words are English, the phrase is foreign.

As learning advanced, new words were adopted into our language, but I think with little improvement of the art of translation, though foreign nations and other languages offered us models of a better method; till in the age of Elizabeth we began to find that greater liberty was necessary to elegance, and that elegance was necessary to general reception; some essays were then made upon Italian poets, which deserve the praise and gratitude of posterity. But the old practice was not suddenly forsaken: Holland filled the nation with literal translations; and, what is yet more strange, the same exactness was obstinately practised in the versions of the poets. This absurd labour of construing into rhyme was countenanced by Jonson in his version of Horace; and whether it be that more men have learning than genius, or that the endeavours of that time were more directed towards knowledge than delight, the accuracy of Jonson found more imitators than the elegance of Fairfax; and May, Sandys and Holliday confined themselves to the toil of rendering line for line, not indeed with equal felicity, for May and Sandys were poets, and Holliday only a scholar and a critic.

Felltham appears to consider it as the established law of poetical translation that the lines should be neither more nor fewer than those of the original; and so long had this prejudice prevailed that Denham praises Fanshawe's version of Guarini as the example of a new and noble way, as the first attempt to brake the boundaries of custom, and assert the natural freedom of the Muse.

In the general emulation of wit and genius which the festivity of the Restoration produced, the poets shook off their constraint, and considered translation as no longer confined to servile closeness. But reformation is seldom the work of pure virtue or unassisted reason. Translation was improved more by accident than conviction. The writers of the foregoing age had at least learning equal to their genius; and, being often more able to explain the sentiments or illustrate the allusions of the ancients, than to exhibit their graces and transfuse their spirit, where, perhaps, willing sometimes to conceal their want of poetry by profusion of literature, and, therefore, translated literally, that their fidelity might shelter their insipidity or harshness. The wits of Charles's time had seldom more than slight and superficial views; and their care was to hide their want of learning behind the colours of a gay imagination; they, therefore, translated always with freedom, sometimes with licentiousness, and, perhaps, expected that their readers should accept sprightliness for knowledge, and consider ignorance and mistake as the impatience and negligence of a mind to rapid to stop at difficulties, and too elevated to descend to minuteness.

Thus was translation made more easy to the writer, and more delightful to the reader; and there is no wonder if ease and pleasure have found their advocates. The paraphrastic liberties have been almost uni-

versally admitted; and Sherbourne, whose learning was eminent, and who had no need to any excuse to pass slightly over obscurities, is the only writer who, in later times, has attempted to justify or revive the ancient severity.

There is undoubtedly a mean to be observed. Dryden saw very early that closeness best preserved an author's sense, and that freedom best exhibited his spirit; he, therefore, will deserve the highest praise, who can give a representation at once faithful and pleasing, who can convey the same thoughts with the same graces, and who, when he translates, changes nothing but the language.