
Clifford E. Landers. *Literary translation: a practical guide*, Clevedon/Inglaterra: Multilingual Matters, 2001, 214 pp.

The title of Clifford E. Landers's book says it all — *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide*. It is a handbook for beginning practitioners, with useful hints on every aspect of the subject, from the decision to become a translator of literature to negotiating the fine print in contracts, with everything that comes in between, elevated topics such as literary style and tone as well as down-to-earth matters like having a real desk instead of working off the kitchen table. Landers delivers on what he promises, with winning good hu-

mor and enthusiasm. But his book elicited rather melancholy reflections in this reviewer. Having done a fair amount of reading in current translation theory — though perhaps not as much as a professional translator and professor of translation should — I have come to believe that there is a widening gulf between theory and practice in our field. More often than not, translation theorists these days seem to devote a great deal of time and energy to criticizing Eurocentrism, phallocentrism or logocentrism; and the crucial fact that translation exists because people need to read texts written in languages they don't know seems at times to be almost irrelevant. The very distinction between originals and translations is said to be an ideological construct based on, and drawing strength from, such disreputable institutions

as cultural imperialism and the subjection of women, and having such deplorable consequences as translators' humiliating second-class citizenship in the republic of letters. Worse, translators are themselves to blame if they are not given equal-footing status with authors; their self-deprecating attitude is partly responsible for the mythification of the "original," a concept so riddled with ideology and prejudice that it cannot be suffered to appear in print unescorted by a pair of condemning quotation marks. Well, after immersing oneself in such alarming conjectures, one turns to a book intended to be a practical guide for those who are actually involved in translation as real-life work, and what does one find? Right on page 8 Landers states that one of the qualities literary translators should have is humility, "because even our best efforts will never succeed in capturing in all its grandeur the richness of the original." The same point is made toward the end of the book: "If there is anything that translation teaches, it is humility" (p. 171). Note that the notion of "original" is introduced as a self-evident concept that requires no theoretical scrutiny, not even quotation marks. Again, on page 90 we read that "ideally, the translator

strives to have no style at all and attempts to disappear into and become indistinguishable from the style of the [source language] author." This, however, does not mean that Landers is innocent of theory. He is well aware of Lawrence Venuti's critique of transparency and defense of resistance; but in a book more than 200 pages long Venuti's theory is short-shrifted in a section less than three pages long, concluding with: "literary translation is hard enough without intentionally introducing elements of obfuscation" (p. 54). I may be wrong here, but I honestly believe that the sentiment expressed in this statement is one that will be approved by most practicing literary translators, and deplored by most translation theorists (Anthony Pym being one of the exceptions that proverbially prove the rule). In translation, it seems, theory is theory and practice is practice, and never the twain shall meet. Not exactly a healthy state of affairs.

Once, however, I shook off these unpleasant musings, I found much in Landers's book to cheer me up. Whereas a lot of the theory published these days is marked by a dour, accusatory tone that makes you think of rap lyrics, the most striking thing about *Literary*

Translation: A Practical Guide is the author's cheerful, even chirpy approach to his subject. Clearly Landers is a man in love with his work, a man who sees the casting of a literary work into a different tongue not as an act of violence but as a labor of love. Indeed, from the outset he acknowledges that "in some cases, rather than pay poorly, literary translation pays not at all"; it is a kind of work that "is underpaid because so many are willing to do it for sheer pleasure" (p. 8). (Incidentally, this explanation seems more plausible than the notion that the devaluation of the translation is a consequence of the mythification of the original, for in actual fact it is only in the field of literature that our work tends to be underpaid; translators of software and official translators, to name just two categories, seem to be doing fine.) Much of the pleasure Landers speaks of derives from the awareness that one is building bridges: like Pym, Landers constantly emphasizes that translation is not as much about languages as it is about cultures. And his love for Brazilian literature (not excluding Paulo Coelho!) is evidently sincere. Reading Landers one is reminded of how much fun literary translation can be, a point

not often made by translation-as-rape theorists.

Landers, to be sure, is no theorist. Throughout the book he emphasizes that he is simply presenting one man's approach: this is just how I do it; it is not *the* scientific method. His approach is thoroughly pragmatic; everything he says is based on his own personal experience. One delightful chapter, titled "A Day in the Life of a Literary Translator," turns out to be just that: a description of a working day in Landers's life, as he grapples with Rubem Fonseca's *Bufo & Spallanzani*. One by one he jumps a succession of hurdles major and minor, orders articles from libraries, puzzles over one of Fonseca's more abstruse quotations, and at the end observes that he has "translated 10 pages, making 4289 decisions in the process" (p. 44). In passages like this the author conveys the joys and hassles of translating literature with admirable vividness. The abundance of real-life examples taken from the author's own translations of Brazilian works makes the book particularly interesting to us. The major disadvantage of his approach is obvious: Landers has little to say about anything outside his immediate experience. So it is that,

since he works mostly with fiction, his discussion of poetic translation is perfunctory and unsatisfactory. At times, too, his practical methods struck me as, well, a bit impractical. Just to give one example, Landers makes hard copies of three different drafts, using paper of different color each time, and marks his corrections with pens of various colors; then he duly enters all these color-coded changes into the computer. Even if it is true, as he argues, that “reading from a monitor screen is some 20 percent slower than from hard copy” (p. 160), whatever time he saves this way is surely more than offset by the time-consuming process of first correcting the text on paper and then entering the corrections into the computer; also, in this way he introduces an additional stage in which further mistakes will inevitably be made. (And I haven’t even mentioned all the expense in paper and printer ink.) But most of the practical advice Landers has to give is quite sound, and all neophytes will profit from reading his book.

I can’t help thinking, though, that a translator with so much experience in Brazilian literature could have done more in the way of discussing specific problems of Portuguese-to-English translation, or, even better, of Romance-to-English translation, since much that applies to Portuguese will also hold true for Spanish and Italian, sometimes even for French. This, of course, is to criticize Landers for not have written a different sort of book; his aim being to address “problems of literary translation, whatever the original language” (p. ix), it would have been inconsistent of him to go into the specifics of Portuguese. As it stands, Landers’s handbook is a fine introduction to literary translation as a practical activity in its own right. That may not be as exciting as using translation to right the wrongs of more than two thousand years of Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian oppression of women, gays, non-Caucasians and other mistreated groups; but to this reviewer, at any rate, it sounds exciting enough.

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