

The task of the translator

In his misplaced and surely excessive response to a footnote in Theresa Orozco's essay on Gadamer's 'philosophical interventions under National Socialism' (*RP* 78) Andrew Bowie (Letters, *RP* 80) is not content to point out that Orozco has quoted a sentence from Manfred Frank's *Stil in der Philosophie* out of context, but insists that, as the translator of the article, I have 'conspired' with the author in intentionally distorting Frank's views. In doing so he unwittingly raises a number of interesting hermeneutic questions. Can a translator meaningfully be said to 'conspire' with the author of the text? Is it not the task of the translator to represent the content of the original article 'warts and all'? Indeed, would it not represent a serious breach of responsibility to 'silently correct' or 'tone down' the ideas put forward by the author, whether the translator agrees with them or not?

The translation should allow the reader to make up his or her own mind; indeed, it should allow the reader to raise objections of the sort made by Bowie himself, including worries concerning the misuse of quotations. A text which had already been 'improved' by the translator would hide such issues from view. However, there is a second and more complex issue at stake here. Bowie baldly asserts that mine is a 'wrong translation' of the passage, basing his claim on successfully re-identifying the meaning of the sentence in its original context. Bowie maintains that Orozco has distorted Frank's words by obscuring their intended reference (to Wittgenstein's saying/showing distinction at the end of the *Tractatus*), employing them instead to refer to the philosophy of Heidegger, in particular to the way in which his deployment of the notion of the esoteric might relate to the issue of Plato's 'secret doctrine' under National Socialism. It is in the context of this silence, the silence of those who claim to be in possession of knowledge which they cannot or will not open to discursive examination, that I chose to translate the phrase *kann immer noch bedeutsam sich verschweigen* as 'can always remain silent profoundly'.

The hermeneutic question raised by Bowie's charge of my having 'conspired' with the author of the article by translating the term *bedeutsam* as 'profound' rather than 'significant' devolves upon the issue of whether I should have translated the sentence in accordance with its original reference in Manfred Frank's book or whether – as Bowie clearly recognizes in reacting against the connotations of elitism and depth which adhere to the word 'profound' – in accordance with the reference given to it in the text by Orozco which I was commissioned to translate. As any experienced translator knows, the choice which determines how any particular word or phrase is to be rendered is at least partially determined by the overall economy of the text. Not only will certain terms already have been employed elsewhere, but differences in context and register can decisively influence the meaning even of individual words. The limitations of a notion of translation which is based upon lexicographical equivalence alone has only recently been discussed in these pages by Lawrence Venuti (*RP* 70). Once it is recognized that the minimum unit of linguistic meaning is not the word or even the sentence, but that meaning can vary according to the context of utterance – indeed, in the view of the later Wittgenstein, according to the *use* to which words and sentences are put in particular contexts – the project of 'correcting' the translation of a term by referring back to a context prior to and distinct from the text at hand starts to seem very misguided indeed.

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