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TEACHING TRANSLATION THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract. *This article deals with the theory and practice of translation.*
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It is safe to say that, across the globe, translation is still heavily relied on as a tool for teaching classical languages and texts that are written in them, both in secondary and higher education. Indeed, translation exercises are perhaps the most common method to train and evaluate Greek and Latin text comprehension, grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Some teachers and textbooks also make use of existing translations to complement and supplement the (more or less) original texts that they are tackling in class. Given that translation plays such a prominent role in Classics, is it not remarkable, then, that students generally spend very little time reflecting on the act of translation itself, not just as a shift between different languages, but as a transfer and transformation of meaning and form between different cultures?

Translations completed by Latin and Greek students in class are not usually meant to be read or heard by anyone but their teachers and fellow students. Typically, they tend towards what scholars and professional translators call ‘calque translations’ or ‘translationese’: a more or less word-for-word rendering of the syntactical structures and turns of phrase of the source text that relies on basic dictionaries or word lists, frequently resulting in an awkward, unidiomatic and sometimes even incomprehensible prose that few people would ever read for their pleasure. Classroom translation might be a handy didactic tool, but its results rarely do justice to the text under scrutiny [1].

Such is often the background in translation of the Latinists who are responsible for most published translations of Latin and Greek texts. Due to the general absence of specialized programmes and courses that focus on literary translation from classical languages, it is often the only institutional training which they will ever receive. Those that are nonetheless able to produce enjoyable translations for a broader audience usually do not have their youthful experiences as classroom translators to thank.

Most of the reader, however, is there for the students to browse through freely, depending on personal interests and the particular challenges they are facing in their own translation assignments. During classes, we also discuss plenty of samples from published translations and share experiences from our own translation practice with the students when relevant [2].

Instead of an exam, we give our students three assignments through which they are to achieve the course goals: 1) a couple of introductory start-up exercises; 2) a multi-faceted personal final project that entails both theoretical reflection and creative translation practice. These are detailed below:

1)Start-up exercises. These are the students’ first proper encounter with some of the typical challenges posed to the literary translator of historical texts. At the very start of the course, they are given little more than a week to translate a short piece of prose and poetry in Latin and/or Greek from a short list of options that all share a humorous nature. We ask them to also add a

couple of paragraphs (250 words per translation) that sketch out a basic analysis of the source texts (genre, style, translational challenges), a description of their implied reader, and an indication of which aspects of the source texts the students want to convey and how they have tried to achieve this [3].

That is why, halfway through the course, after a round of individual feedback from us, they have to hand in a second, revised version of one of their initial translations. This time, we also require them to neatly formulate their translational intent, argue its merits, and highlight a couple of significant translational choices and shifts. They also have to attach at least one so-called 'reference text', meaning an existing (literary) text originally written in the target language, which they have used as a formal and stylistic point of reference/source of inspiration. After another round of feedback, this time by one of their peers, they submit a third and final version, which is often rather far removed from their first attempts.

1) Critical analysis of a recently published translation. Following our session on the description of translation shifts, we divide the students into small groups for a group assignment in which they will put to use their newly acquired skills.

At the end of this group assignment, the students should be better equipped to formally analysis and comment on literary translations. In addition to honing their analytical and academic writing skills, exercises like this may also aid the future teachers among them in their selection of translations for classroom use and give them something to fall back on when they find themselves invited to review newly published translations.

2)Individual final project. This is meant to be the culmination of the entire course, in which the students bring together what they have learnt during classes, through other assignments, and in their additional reading. The project consists of three parts: first of all, a well-considered and executed translation of a piece of Latin or Greek prose or poetry

At the end of we should require students to write an academic essay (c. 3000 words) in which they demonstrate their ability to conceptualize and substantiate a translation project of their own. This includes: an elaboration of their personal poetical view on the translation of historical Greek or Latin texts in general; a translationally relevant analysis of their source text; a motivated statement of translational intent, illustrated with Dutch reference texts; a critical self-evaluation of their translation, also discussing a number of interesting translational shifts; and a bibliography of all the primary and secondary literature they have consulted while working on the project.

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