

Pym, Anthony (2012). *On translator ethics: Principles for mediation between cultures*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. ISBN 9789027224545. EUR 80.

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This book is for the most part a (very readable) translation by Heike Walker of Pym's 1997 book *Pour une éthique du traducteur*, though there are substantial additions and subtractions as well as reworkings of articles previously published in English. The polemical "Updates" which end each chapter are tenuously related to what precedes them, as Pym admits, but they still make for interesting reading. The argument (in a nutshell, that we should translate only if that will promote cross-cultural cooperation) is presented in Pym's customary amusing and thought-provoking if somewhat meandering style.

The French source was part of a trend in the later 1990s to changing the focus of Translation Studies from the wordings of translations in relation to the source, or the reception of translations in the target culture, to translators themselves. Pym explains that the French title has been rendered as "translator ethics", not "ethics of the translator", because he wants "to embed the notion of 'acting as a translator' more fully into the mode of ethical thought itself" (p. 4). Rather than apply pre-existing universal ethical principles to translators, he wants to talk about the limited ethics that stem from being in the position of a translator—what Daniel Simeoni, in his mostly positive review, called *la fonction-traducteur* (1999, p. 389). English 'ethics' covers both *déontologie* (rules governing commercial relations with clients, as promoted by professional translators' associations) and *éthique* (philosophical questions about how "I" should relate to The Other through the method of translation, usually discussed in connection with literary translation). Pym explicitly rejects this French distinction, which earned him a sharp rebuke from Henri Meschonnic (2007, pp. 11-15), to which Pym responds briefly (pp. 2 and 170-171).

Chapter 1 is about Schleiermacher's 1813 lecture "on the different methods of translating". Pym focuses on what Schleiermacher calls *Blendlinge* (hybrids), with reference to the latter's view that translations into German from French should be very literal so as to help with the development of the German language and of the small German states of that time. Pym criticizes Schleiermacher (and Venuti, in the Update section) for focusing on language and texts and for assuming that translators are members of the target culture. For Pym, the interesting *Blendlinge* are not hybrid texts but people who have an in-between status—resident foreigners, immigrants and of course translators (when performing their duties). The book's subtitle reflects the notion that translators, situated as they are in this in-between position, are especially well positioned to assist with dialogue and negotiation in situations of conflict, a theme that has pervaded a great many of Pym's writings of recent years. His is first and foremost an ethics of intercultural communication rather than an ethics of client service or of truthful representation of source texts. Reading between the lines, one can hear the debates that were (in 1997) and still are ongoing in Quebec and in France (and elsewhere in Europe) about multiculturalism versus uniculturalism (setting of clear boundaries between *linguo-cultures*, with everyone being on one side or the other).

In Chapter 2, Pym parses in great detail a story from Herodotus about two Spartans who travel to Persia around 480 BCE and offer their lives to King Xerxes as compensation for two Persian envoys who had been murdered in Sparta. The king declines to have them killed and invites

them to stay with him; they refuse and return to Sparta. Pym points to the fact that by virtue of travelling to Persia, the two Spartans have become in-betweeners, knowledgeable about both Greece and Persia. He thinks it a shame that they did not stay in Persia and form an intercultural community there (as Alexander the Great sought to do 150 years later). The story also raises the 'don't kill the messenger' issue and the fate of several of Salman Rushdie's translators. Throughout the book, Pym takes the position that translators are more than messengers: while they are not authors and are thus not committed to the message of the translation, they cannot evade responsibility for agreeing to translate a text and thus for the effects of disseminating it (for a brief statement, see the 'second principle' of translator ethics on p. 166). It was not clear to me how this distinction between the message and its dissemination would work in practice. Like Koskinen (2000, p. 71), I found this chapter mystifying. Pym has not used the opportunity of this revised version to answer Koskinen's very detailed criticisms of the French source and other writings of his on the same topic (Koskinen, 2000, is not even in the References)<sup>1</sup>.

Chapter 3 puts forward the interesting idea that what makes someone a *professional* translator is not word-working ability as such but rather the fact of being *trusted* by outsiders to take responsibility for providing a text that properly represents the source. In the Update section, Pym suggests that in future, professionals in this sense "will increasingly find themselves approving the work of machines and amateurs" (p. 85): technological advances mean that outputs of machine translation and of people like volunteer Facebook translators will increasingly be useable, perhaps with checking and revision by a professional, whose stamp of approval will create trust (translators are unlikely to have a monopoly in this regard since subject-matter experts are also in a position to legitimate a translation).

Chapter 4 is about translators' causal powers, for without agency there can be no responsibility. Pym reviews the risk when theory focuses on just one of the four Aristotelian causes: will translators' duty be to the source text (material cause), the purpose of the translation (final cause), translational norms (formal cause) or themselves/the profession (efficient cause)? Since all the causes are operating together, the question arises as to when it is best for translators to intervene in a situation. The translator, says Pym, is responsible for the decision to translate, though he has to immediately qualify this because not all translators are in a position to refuse: their financial circumstances force them to accept texts, perhaps in fields of which they have little knowledge, and it is clients who decide whether to translate, or perhaps other professions (I thought of social media engineers). Pym would like to see translators strive collectively to have more influence over the decision to translate.

Chapter 5 was not in the French source but was included by way of thanks for the support provided by the Nida Institute of Biblical Scholarship for this translation. It's a defence of Nida against three critics (including, once again, Venuti—apparently the author's favourite *bête noire*). Pym points out that Nida's principle of dynamic equivalence allows for many different translations for different recipients (in the case of the Bible: church-goers, children, lay study groups, philologists) (p. 122). Given this, his argument (I think) is that the translator's job is to create conditions for recipients to become involved with a text, such involvement being a

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<sup>1</sup> Pym does seem to have modified his earlier concept of a professional intercultural within which translators operate, this having been a principal target of Koskinen's criticism; he is also no longer specifically concerned with professional as opposed to volunteer and other do-it-yourself translators. For a defence of Pym against Koskinen, see Tack, 2001, pp. 300-302. There is a very brief response by Pym to Koskinen and to Alexis Nossu's rather negative review of the French source in Pym, 2001, pp. 133-134.

necessary prelude to the understanding which is usually thought to arise from translation.

Chapter 6 is about the creation of cooperation, Pym's central theme. He defines it as the attainment of mutual benefits among the parties involved in translation. It's harder to achieve cooperation in cross-cultural than in intracultural communication because of lower trust. The extra effort required entails costs, which ought to be less than projected benefits. Pym argues that sometimes translation is too expensive in this sense, and it would be better to resort to a lingua franca or language learning, or else things like gisting, machine translation or rough translation requiring limited effort.

What is one to make of a translator ethics that seeks cooperation? I am dubious, for two reasons. First, I agree with Simeoni's statement, in his review, that mediators tend to be ardent defenders of the social status quo, to which they wish to reconcile the parties (1999, p. 390). Second, I suspect Pym wants translators to do more than I think we can in a world where serious conflict arises not from miscommunication but from gross inequalities of wealth and power. During my career as a French-English translator in Canada, I have accepted a less glorious ethics of helping: my duty is to enable French speakers to write in their own language yet still be understood by others. I like Andrew Chesterman's idea (2001, p. 153), partly accepted and partly rejected by Pym (p. 149), of an oath in which I would promise, amongst other things, to minimize misunderstandings across language barriers.

## References

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