

# Introduction

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**The Translator's Dialogue: Giovanni Pontiero**

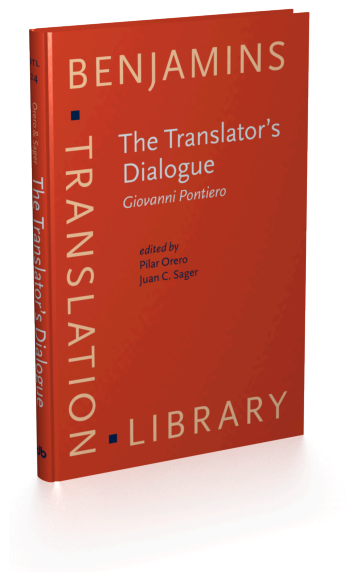
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## Introduction

In recent times, much has been written about literary translation by linguists and other theorists; yet from translators themselves not so much has been heard, though there is a tradition of reflecting on the problems of their art dating back to St. Jerome and continued by such diverse translators as Luther, Dryden, Voltaire and more recently Ezra Pound and V.V. Nabokov.

This new title in Benjamin's Translation Library will, hopefully, continue the tradition and re-open this line of reflection so that the translator's voice will be heard directly and in parallel to theoretical and didactic writing on the subject.

*The Translator's Dialogue* is the title under which this volume will appear, thus opening the door for professionals to report on the many aspects of their intriguing work which is of interest to the reader of translations, the student of translation and, it is hoped, also the theorist. The concentration on particular types of translation and individual translators represents a new departure which may lead to a better understanding of the thought and decision processes that guide the difficult act of transferring content, emotion and style, separating them from the language in which they were first expressed.

The present volume collects the writings on translation by the prize-winning literary translator, Giovanni Pontiero, together with observations by some of the authors whose work he translated, editors of his translations, fellow translators and critics. His articles and lectures permit an insight into both the development of a career in translation and his approach to making foreign literature accessible to English readers.

In his translations Giovanni Pontiero covered a remarkable range of writers and literary genres. Starting with the translation of Brazilian Modernist poetry, he gradually widened his scope to other poetry, stories, diaries, chronicles and novels. His initial choice of poetry clearly foreshadowed his later preference for stylistically complex texts; his independent position as an academic also gave him considerable freedom to choose the authors he wanted to translate, without consideration of financial reward for his work.

Beside the many authors he translated throughout his career, in recent years he was able to concentrate on two major writers. The first important

author whom he helped to launch in the English-speaking world, the Brazilian Clarice Lispector (1924-1977), was a highly idiosyncratic writer who later became an icon for feminist literature. In 1986 Giovanni Pontiero had the good sense and fortune to discover and present to English readers José Saramago, one of Portugal's most distinguished contemporary writers. This happened when, from among a number of novels he was sent for review, he chose Saramago's *Memorial do Convento* as the most original and important work; he subsequently translated this book under the title of *Baltasar and Blimunda*. Based on the success of this novel, he became Saramago's exclusive English translator and their collaboration developed not only into a close friendship but also into joint literary prizes and distinctions.

The common element among all the texts he selected for translation is their linguistic intricacy. He deliberately sought out texts which offered a challenge both from the point of view of their interpretation and their translation and he took great pleasure in experimental forms of writing, be it the problematic rendering of João Guimarães Rosa's 'My Uncle the Jaguar' in which a jaguar is made to speak in a mixture of onomatopoeic sound patterns, Indian languages and Brazilian Portuguese; or Daniel Moyano's invention of a libretto by an Australian composer with a duet between a kangaroo and a platypus.

His interest in the style of Clarice Lispector can be gathered from the Introduction to his translation of *A Descoberta do Mundo* (*Discovering the World*):

... she [Clarice Lispector] spoke of 'tacit understanding' between her and the reader, as if conveying thoughts and feelings by means of a 'gesture, a brushstroke, or melody without words'. Critics have spoken of the 'effervescence or efflorescence of things imagined' in an attempt to define the unmistakable quality in her writing which evokes rather than describes, encircles rather than strikes her target. She preferred suggestive ambiguities to clear-cut definitions. Hence her unique achievement was to deepen and renew the Portuguese language. An inventive use of vocabulary and syntax produces mysterious nuances and a pattern of crescendo and diminuendo more readily associated with musical composition. (Lispector, 1992:28)

One of the main problems for the literary translator is obviously finding the right individual voice for each author he translates and, within the work of any one author, the right voice for the persona adopted by the author for his novel, story or essay. All authors translated by Giovanni Pontiero have an unmistakable, highly personal mode of expression. This is most vividly stated by José Saramago when he said: "The narrator does not exist. What exists is the voice of the author. He is the most important thing - not the characters, nor

the style, nor the plot. A reader does not read the novel, he reads the novelist." On the other hand, Clarice Lispector, despite her own highly distinctive voice, varies considerably in her attitude to the narrator. While always being highly idiosyncratic in structure and collocations, she frequently presents her narrative exclusively from the point of view of one of her characters, or even hides behind an identified narrator. In *The Hour of the Star*, for example, she chose to tell her story through a male narrator, who introduces the novel, thereby creating a double distance between reader and author. Such variations undoubtedly affect the voice to be adopted by the translator and constitute a major creative element of literary translation.

Saramago's voice, by contrast, is always highly audible, and in terms of the printed page highly visible, as Giovanni Pontiero clearly identified in his introductory note to *The Stone Raft*:

Saramago insists that his prose style adheres to the basic principle that everything *said* is destined to be *heard*. Defining himself as an oral narrator whose words are meant to have the same impact as music, he claims to orchestrate rather than merely construct phrases and to write as if he were composing a score by concentrating on a pattern of sounds (loud or soft) and pauses (long or short). For him, commas and full stops suffice to create the necessary tension in prose, and he is adamant that any additional punctuation marks would inevitably destroy the sense of 'continuous flow' and hinder his experiments with timbre and resonance. (Saramago, 1994:vii)

This attempt to recreate a printed text that is meant to be read aloud was fully recognised by one reviewer of the translation of *O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo* (*The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*), when he wrote:

The Gospel is in fact an intensely religious book, passionately written and so beautifully translated by Giovanni Pontiero that it seems to convey the rhythms and resonance of the Authorized Version. (Gilmour, 1995)

The art of literary translation is beset by the conflict between the readability of a translation and the preservation of features of the original which may impair ease of reading. This can also be expressed as the tension between what Lawrence Venuti (1995) called 'the translator's visibility' — or 'audibility' as Giovanni Pontiero, with his concern for tone, would undoubtedly have preferred — and the acceptability of the translation to its new readership in terms of conformity to the current usage of the target language. Even critics are divided on this issue and this is clearly reflected in the many reviews of the novels Giovanni Pontiero translated. Of over a hundred book reviews of novels and stories examined by the editors of this volume, the vast majority seem to

assume the translator's voice to be 'inaudible', treating the book as if it were written in English. The occasional qualifications "readable" or "highly readable" are indifferent as to language and only rarely does a reviewer go beyond such general praise. The observation by one reviewer that a translation was "hard to read in English" does not, however, necessarily imply a criticism but may, in context, simply mean that it is as hard to read in English as the original is in its source language and that therefore the translation has succeeded. But epithets like "well-rendered" and "masterly translated" would appear to imply a comparison with the original which few reviewers are really capable of carrying out and even fewer admit to. Occasionally a reviewer is honest in the admission of his linguistic limitations, which ranges from such contradictory statements as "I have no Portuguese, but I know what I like in English vocabulary..." to more balanced statements which acknowledge difficulties of rendering:

It is probably safe to say, without being able to read Portuguese, that Giovanni Pontiero has done a good job in producing this English version of José Saramago's fourth novel [*The Stone Raft*] to be published here. There is a dreamy, fantastic quality to this prose that could daunt in the early going if not elegantly rendered. (Walters, 1995)

The rare reviewer who seems to know the source language can be more specific:

Giovanni Pontiero's excellent translation preserves the strange, looping rhythms of José Saramago's prose, as well as his likeable self-referential humour, and most important of all, the sense of a deep luminous intelligence which informs the whole enterprise. (Coe, 1994)

In this perennial conflict Giovanni Pontiero seems to have chosen a middle way. Whenever he believed the text warranted it and the publisher was agreeable, he would write introductions or afterwords for his translations, explaining the merit of the work in its own terms. He would surely have agreed with Norman Shapiro's (1995) claim that "a good translation ... should never call attention to itself". Nevertheless, those who had the immense fortune to meet Giovanni Pontiero and to enjoy his friendship, can always hear his voice when reading his translations.

The contents of this book are structured so as to illuminate the translator's work from a variety of angles. First we give Giovanni Pontiero's own thoughts as documented by the small number of essays he wrote and talks he gave over

the years. The second angle is that of the authors he collaborated with and here we are fortunate to have the reflections of José Saramago with whom Pontiero shared an important literary prize. In the next two chapters, two types of readers are represented: the editors who read the translation and prepare it for the particular readership envisaged by the publishing house, and critics and reviewers, i.e. the critical readers who can relate the translation to its original. This is followed by brief biographical notes and a list of the translations Giovanni Pontiero produced over thirty years beside his considerable work and publications in the field of Latin-American literature. Finally we offer a sample of Giovanni Pontiero's skill and art in the form of a hitherto unpublished translation of a story by José Saramago with whose work he most identified before the untimely end of his career.

*Pilar Orero and Juan C Sager*