

# Introduction to the second edition (1983)

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**The Art of Translation**

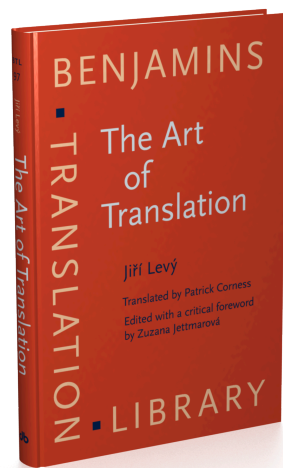
**Jiří Levý †**

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## Introduction to the second edition (1983)

*The Art of Translation* by Jiří Levý was first published in 1963. It was welcomed by readers and expert reviewers alike as the most valuable work on problems of literary translation published in Czechoslovakia. The author successfully combined the approaches of the theoretician, systemic analyst, historian, critic, teacher and populariser. He does not present dry-as-dust theory, but directly invokes theoretical findings to support his solutions for a range of specific problems faced by translators in practice. As a translation critic, he does not dwell on translators' lack of knowledge and their blunders, but seeks, finds and explains the causes of translation difficulties, offering guidance on good literary translation practice. He also calls on his experience as a university teacher; this is not a textbook, though it does have some of the merits of good textbooks, clarifying bewildering issues and simplifying complex ones without distorting them. The explanations are not addressed to experts but to a broad community of interested readers; however, the author does not give precedence to entertaining presentation over valuable content. Therefore the initiated, in particular professional translators, can also learn something from this book.

Levý did not consider his book a theory of translation, calling it simply notes on such a theory. It is much more than notes, of course; the presentation is based on considered theoretical foundations, offering theoretical explanations for individual aspects of translated works and of translation practice. Certain theoretical issues are not addressed, however; the author points out that he does not investigate in detail here those properties of translations that are common to works of literature in general, referring the reader to the literature in the field of literary studies. Nor, for example, is the relationship between literary and non-literary translation addressed here, more precisely (though the terminology itself is inelegant) the relationship between artistic translations of works of art and translations of non-artistic writing. Nor is the full extent of literary translation typology covered here – a broad spectrum ranging from translations reproducing the original as closely as possible to loose paraphrasing etc.

Levý in fact focuses only on translations belonging to the first half of this spectrum, i.e. those seeking the goal of capturing certain characteristics of the original as adequately as possible (of course, this can never mean all its characteristics; usually it is a matter of mere approximation) – such translations are of course the most

common, and they are also differentiated in various ways, depending first of all on which particular aspects of the original are above all to be rendered. This does not depend on the intentions of the individual translator alone; specific period translation norms apply, bound up with the functions of translation in a given culture; these functions also vary at different periods of history. Levý gives due consideration to these circumstances, and discusses translation issues on a broad theoretical basis. Levý's own comprehensive conception of translation was informed by the close analysis of both earlier and more recent Czech writings on translation which accompanied his anthology of texts from this field published in 1957 under the title *České teorie překladu* [Czech Theories of Translation].<sup>1</sup>

In previous generations treatises (or, more commonly, essayistic discussions) were published by prominent, active literary translators, and frequently by original writers too – Otokar Fischer comes to mind here, the leading figure in this field in Czechoslovakia during the first 30 years of the 20th century. After 1945 the study of translation was pursued primarily by researchers who were not practising translators themselves, or who translated only occasionally, like Levý himself in fact, who translated mainly from English in his younger days. They were literary scholars or linguists who had moved away from the old 'philology', evolving new concepts and a methodology of their own.

Levý followed this line, early making a name for himself as a literary scholar and literary historian. He specialised in English but had insight and expertise in several literatures in other languages, not to mention Czech, actively embracing Marxist concepts of literature and art. Drawing on findings and stimuli in a number of related disciplines – aesthetics and the theory of art (especially the sociology of art), linguistics, semiotics and information theory – he gained a wider and deeper insight, broadening his literary background.

It will be recalled that in the late 1950s and early 1960s communication theory and text linguistics were still in their infancy; yet in addition to focusing on the genesis of translation, Levý also pays close attention to both the structure of a translated work and its fundamental components, i.e. the respective stages in the creation and functioning of a translation in the context of the communication process. Here he clearly builds on the most fruitful development in Czechoslovak literary scholarship, and especially in linguistics, of the preceding half-century, but he also responds readily to new pioneering developments elsewhere, in Soviet, Polish, Anglo-American and other research, taking the lead in critically assessing, applying and testing new theoretical and methodological initiatives.

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1. Titles of publications and passages from original works in less familiar languages are accompanied by my English translation in square brackets. (Translator's note)

The main focus of Levý's research interests was translation problems, but he also published a number of valuable literary studies and general theoretical and methodological works (on the genesis and reception of literary works, on the literary process from the perspective of communication theory etc.), works on versification (e.g. on the semantics of verse or on mathematical aspects of versification theory) and literary history (early and modern English writers, especially Ben Jonson, Walt Whitman and T. S. Eliot).

The range of Levý's scholarly contributions, extending beyond the bounds of translation studies, is revealed by the volume of his selected works published posthumously in 1971 under the title *Bude literární věda exaktní vědou?* [Will Literary Studies Become an Exact Science?]

It is not possible here to characterise fully Levý's theoretical conceptions. His life's work as a scholar, unfortunately cut short by his premature death in 1967, and his role in the evolution of translation studies on a national and international level deserve a separate study. Just two characteristic features of Levý's thinking will be pointed out. Firstly there is the functional perspective, enabling him to revisit the hackneyed opposition between demands for faithful or for free translation, and to solve difficulties arising out of structural discrepancies (both formal and semantic) between source and target languages etc.

In this regard, it is worth making clear that the implementation of the functional approach did not lead Levý to overestimate the role of so-called compensation; he is more reticent in this regard than the Fischer school. The second feature is Levý's view of the semiotics of art, by which he distinguishes features of the original which must be preserved in translation from those which may be abandoned. Linguistic characteristics and traditional cultural features of the original, insofar as they are semantically neutral, should not be imitated in translation but replaced or substituted by features which are equally neutral in the language and literary tradition into which the work is introduced in translation.

One may not agree with everything in Levý's book; the generally very positive reviews have made various comments, including some of a general nature, for example that Levý's use of the concept of 'realistic translation' is not quite appropriate, objectively speaking, or on (what I consider) his too negative view of possibilities of using certain types of inexact rhymes in Czech. Like any work, the present book is, as they say, of its own time; but this remark concerns principally certain of Levý's views regarding the nature of a literary work rather than his recommendations regarding 'translation technique', which are a defining feature of *The Art of Translation* and the author's strong point (technique is not a disparaging term; it is derived from the Greek *techne*, i.e. *art*, *skill*).

Levý's analysis of translated works in a variety of genres and sub-genres is accompanied by examples. He focuses most systematically on poetry translations,

bringing to bear his wide and thorough knowledge of versification issues. Of special value are his treatments of comparative versification, of English, French and Spanish prosody in comparison with that of Czech, and comparative studies of the characteristics of verse in individual Slavonic, Romance and Germanic literatures, arising out of differing implementations of syllabic, accentual and accentual-syllabic principles. He also gives attention to the specificity of drama translation; it is noteworthy that he is also able to draw many parallels between acting and translation as 'reproductive' arts. He pays relatively less specific attention to the translation of prose, although recent literary theory has focused particularly on prose and its 'narrative technique' and although prose works are the most numerous amongst literary translations.

*The Art of Translation* was well received abroad also; it was published in a German translation in 1969 (*Die literarische Übersetzung: Theorie einer Kunstgattung*) and in a Russian translation in 1974 (*Iskusstvo perevoda*). Levý adapted many parts of the text for the German edition. For its readers it was appropriate to add German examples and analysis of German textual extracts, in some cases substituting them for Czech examples, but the author also took the opportunity here to adapt the text in other ways; he expanded and elaborated on some theoretical sections, particularly in the opening chapters, introducing more precise, revised commentary and adding further statistical findings and references to recent specialist literature. He also re-arranged the structure of some chapters, in several cases also renaming them.

After so short a time interval, of course, his theoretical approach had not altered, so his revision of the first edition (1963) may be summarised as (a) an adaptation for a German readership and (b) an elaboration, rendering it more thorough and more precise in the light of new findings, as well as a revision of some of his judgements and evaluations, found to have been too categorical.

For this second Czech edition, it was decided that the German version should be taken into account as far as possible, but this was no straightforward matter. The German edition had been written for a different readership, a different linguistic community, literature and culture, so it was impossible to adopt it wholesale. On the other hand, it would not have been appropriate to merely take the first edition of the text and add on the new material which might be useful and of particular interest to Czech readers, because for the German edition the author had introduced a number of further changes, as mentioned above.

A combination of the two versions was therefore decided on, and certain inevitable limitations imposed by the fact that the book was not aimed merely at a close community of experts had to be taken into account. Not all the additions could be included, especially as we did not want to exclude those sections which had been omitted from the German edition. Further limitations were imposed by

the fact that some adjustments were too closely bound up with the German language, in particular translations into German from other languages; in such cases it would not be adequate to simply add translations of example passages into Czech, whether non-literary or literary, if indeed such texts existed, because in translation into another language issues would come to the fore that differed to some extent from those on which the author's analysis was based. Additionally, in a text published twenty years earlier it was essential to alter some additional details in the light of changed circumstances, and to make minor corrections.

The editor attempted to preserve the letter and the spirit of the original work as far as possible. As a matter of principle, he did not introduce a style of his own; only in an insignificant number of cases did he have to slightly adjust the wording, in the interests of fluency etc. This also applies to translation of the German text into Czech (actually, 'back translation', because the German edition was based on Levý's Czech manuscript, which is unavailable to us), but the editor-translator did not attempt to imitate all the author's idiosyncrasies of language; naturally, he consistently adopts Levý's own terminology. However, it was not possible to avoid a certain, involuntary, degree of subjectivity in some of the particular choices that had to be made and in the way the two versions were combined.

Had it been Jiří Levý's destiny to live amongst us today (he would have been only 56 years old in 1983), he would undoubtedly have prepared a new edition of his *Art of Translation*, taking a somewhat different, or perhaps an entirely different form. Given his vigour and dedication, I believe he would most likely have presented a newly conceived theory of translation founded on his new research and taking account of developments in the discipline as a whole. He would also have investigated some recent period of translated literature into Czech, for example.

As it is, we are convinced that the present updated edition of Jiří Levý's epoch-making, seminal work in Czech literary translation theory, *The Art of Translation*, now updated and including some additions and amendments based on the German version, will be received by today's readers with interest, and that they will learn something new from it. May it inspire translation studies specialists to prepare new publications; they will always have to measure up to Jiří Levý's work, whether they follow in his footsteps or seek new directions.

Karel Hausenblas  
Editor-Translator

