

Correspondence with a Translator: Ken Knabb Refuses to Participate in a Collective Endeavor

[22 August 2013]

Dear Bill & Ken,

Please find attached a letter of proposal based on discussions that Alastair Hemmens and I have had over the last two months.

We thought we should approach the both of you first with this proposal.

Any thoughts would be greatly appreciated, particularly with regard to interest, feasibility and other people you think would interested in such a project.

Best wishes,

Anthony Hayes

Re: Basic Proposals for a collective complete translation of *Internationale situationniste*

Dear Comrades,

The project that we are putting forward here is one that I think all of us have felt a need for at some point in time. Many of you, particularly Bill and Ken, have done a great deal of excellent work over the years to make texts from the SI's journal available to the English-speaking public. However, there is still no complete English facsimile of the journal available online or in print. What we are proposing is to finally make the journal available as a complete critical work in English with a new collective translation from scratch that will ensure its quality and impact. We want this to be a collective effort that is also an opportunity for those of us who have already translated these texts to revise them, to get the input of others and to make our efforts part of,

what we feel, will be one of the most significant translation projects for the revolutionary movement there can be. With this in mind, please consider the following draft proposals that we have put together.

Proposals [underlined points are those we feel very strongly about]:

1. Goal

A printable black and white pdf of a complete facsimile translation of *Internationale situationniste*, the SI's journal, from scratch, with a table of contents and an index of people and / or themes and key terms, without copyright, available for free online and to purchase at cost in printed form.

2. Organisation

A collective translation committee made up of all those taking part, a division of translation and tasks to members according to personal desire with flexible deadlines, collective review and confirmation of all translations, collective decision on all editorial issues. A practice of keeping in touch with members who have agreed to this to check how it's going, to offer support, to make sure they feel they can do the tasks that they have agreed to in the time they agreed to [a mutually beneficial support network, in short, that ensures the project is moving forward and everyone knows what state the whole translation process is in].

3. Editorial Guidelines

Style guide to be established: American English, original fonts, on going discussions about how to translate key terms (détournement, dérive, recuperation, volonté de vivre etc., a list of which will probably develop over time as will the debate) [we feel that it is best to make these technical terms we associate with the SI, preserving their original French form as much as possible e.g. recuperation not co-optation, dérive not drift, will to live not desire to live etc.], should quotations of non-SI material in the journal be based on existing English translations?, other issues that may arise ...

We want it to be understood that we appreciate that not everyone, ourselves included, may always be able to contribute as much time as we would like on a consistent basis. Anthony, for example, has his work on the SI to be getting on with, we all have jobs or are looking for them [unfortunate in both cases], at the moment Alastair is still trying to get his translation of *Crédit à mort* finished. However, we feel that this is a long-term project and will inevitably have periods of intense participation and lower ones by individual members. The main thing is that we are all extremely passionate about the ideas of the SI and making them available. We think that this fact combined with a support network and people only agreeing to work that they genuinely think they will have the time and energy for will ensure the project moves forward as a collective effort.

Please let us know what you think, how interested in the project you may be and let us get the conversation started. Alastair is going to set up an internet forum where those involved can start having a collective discussion about how to move forward.

In solidarity,

Anthony Hayes and Alastair Hemmens

Dear folks,
BCC: Jean-Pierre Baudet

- (1) Count me in, with the proviso indicated in #3 below.
- (2) Attached is the document with a few comments included.
- (3) I'm uncomfortable with Knabb's participation: he has been happy to work with (and pay licensing fees to) Alice Becker-Ho, whose conduct since 1994 I find completely unsupportable. If Knabb can either explain his work with Alice in a satisfactory way (this would be quite an accomplishment) or if he will distance himself from her (and explain why), I will be happy to withdraw my objection. Otherwise, if Knabb is in, I am out.

Bill

Dear Bill,

As we say in French: “on ne saurait mieux dire”.

Amitiés

Jean-Pierre

Dear Anthony and Bill,

I have to say that I find Knabb's response very bizarre. Collective translation is a very common thing to do for large projects such as this as is the use of translation committees. In fact, one of the most important and successful translation projects in the history of the English language (the *King James Bible*) was produced in exactly this way, involving literally hundreds of translators working over a period of several years. In the contemporary period, collective translation for large projects is also very common (particularly when the texts involves multiple authors and articles). I also take umbrage with this notion that we are not “qualified” to undertake this task. We all have experience of translation and are familiar with the theoretical concepts and history behind these texts. We already have a practice of looking over each others' work and making corrections / suggestions. Indeed, what are these “qualifications” that we need unless they are official ones recognised by the Spectacle, which has not had a fantastic history of translating Situationist texts correctly! I think a lot of this response has to do with Knabb projecting his own personal difficulties with creating with others on to any collective project rather than the merits or lack thereof of the actual proposed project. I agree that if there were huge theoretical and stylistic differences on the part of the translators this might be a problem but I feel that we three at least are mostly on the same level when it comes to what the SI is all about. Moreover, this also underlies the need to have pre-established guidelines agreed on by everyone and hence, at the very least, a conversation about the basis on which this project could be realised to everyone's satisfaction.

Alastair Hemmens

Alastair

I didn't see Knabb's response.
Might you forward it to me?

Bill

Dear Antony and Alastair,

Thanks for your message. I wish you the best with your project, but I cannot imagine taking part in it. My experience in collaborating on translations is that it is a very delicate matter even for people who are highly qualified and very congenial with each other. The idea of collaborating with Bill Brown, whom I do not consider to be qualified for such work and who is hardly very congenial, is inconceivable.

Not surprisingly, the feeling seems to be mutual. But I'm in good company: by Brown's standards, Debord himself, if he were still alive, would not be qualified to take part in this project due to his work with Alice and to the fact that he dealt with commercial publishers -- unless perhaps he humbly "explained himself" to Brown's satisfaction. (If you are curious, my "work with Alice," whom I haven't even heard from in years, consisted solely in her having selected me to translate Debord's filmscripts.)

But even supposing that Brown was not involved, I would not dream of submitting my work to a virtual committee of people of uncertain competences and varied stylistic tastes and having to explain and defend the choices I had taken great care in making regarding countless issues of content and stylistic nuances.

Nor would I want to be indirectly responsible (as a member of such a committee) for whatever translations those other people might produce. Or else be saddled with having to painstakingly correct (or rewrite) their work and then having to undertake the often thankless task of trying to convince them that each of my revisions represented an improvement over their version, which they probably put a lot of work into and which they may have been very proud of.

I can see regularizing a few basic terms (though even that might require

some flexibility, depending on different contexts), but apart from that there are countless other subtle matters of style that could never be regularized or agreed upon.

I suspect that even with the best will in the world, you and any other collaborators will not find this collective manner of working very feasible. Either you will get into unresolvable arguments or you will end up compromising with bland, lowest-common-denominator versions.

If an acceptable publisher proposed such a project to me and gave me *carte blanche* and paid me adequately for the immense amount of work it would take, I would do the whole thing myself (and then solicit critiques and suggestions from a few qualified friends and contacts).

In my experience, that is the simplest and usually the best way to translate: One very qualified person does a translation, then shows it to one or more friends who are also highly qualified in one way or another, asking them to make critiques and suggestions. The translator then decides which of their suggestions to incorporate. There may be further discussions of a few points that remain questionable, but after such discussions the translator makes all the final decisions (and takes responsibility for any errors or weaknesses in the finished version). In this way -- again, assuming that the translator is highly competent both in understanding the original language and in writing the end language -- the final translation is likely to be pretty good. The worst that can happen is that there may be minor differences of style from one translator to another.

I'm mentioning this because I think you have already started to do a complete online version of the I.S. journals using various people's translations. I wonder why you don't just continue that project. First by filling in all the gaps as best you can. Then, when you've done that, going back and seeing which versions most need to be revised (or redone from scratch). And then, at that point only, figuring out the best way to accomplish such revisions or replacements.

It's true that this would only be a temporary compromise measure. But a really "definitive" edition is not likely to be created in the way you are proposing. Whereas a continuation of your current online project would at least gradually improve the quantity and then the quality of available translations, while possibly helping to prepare the way for an eventual more

definitive published version.

Cheers,
Ken Knabb

Dear Jean-Pierre,

Knabb speaks!

Mind you, he didn't send his comments to me, since I am "uncongenial" and "unqualified."

I had to ask to see them!

As you will see, there is much to be amazed about therein.

His comments about Alice are . . . typical of someone who has dealt with Alice.

Bill

Knabb,

You are a *coward* for not sending me these comments directly.

Oh, and though *you believe yourself* to be someone who is "highly qualified" and very "competent," you got Anthony's name wrong. It is Anthony, *not* Antony!

LOL.

PS. My translations of Sanguinetti's texts are authorized (read and double-checked) by Sanguinetti himself. You, by contrast, were spurned / rejected outright by Debord when he was still alive. Still think your shit doesn't smell? BWAHAHAHA.

Bill

Thanks Bill.

To put it shortly: while Knabb's discussion about the art of translation appears to me quite valid and important, what he writes about Alice and Debord is mere rubbish. It means: no criticism at all!

All best
Jean-Pierre

Besides, the method he recommends is the method you have always been using yourself!

[28 August 2013]

Dear Ken,

I am sorry that you are not interested in being involved in this project, however considering your response perhaps it is for the best.

I find it hard to comprehend how you can believe that collective work is not 'very feasible.' No doubt such a project will produce its own problems, but considering the collective and collaborative nature of the SI's project we believe it is the best way to proceed.

One of the points of setting up a translation committee would be to gauge people's 'competency' with regards to translation, along with other attributes necessary to carry out such a project. For instance I envisage that the committee would ultimately encompass people not directly involved in translation, however initially I would hope that all those involved would be capable, to varying degrees, of reading and translating French. Thus Alastair and I pitched the proposal to the two people who have successfully translated more Situationist writing into English than anyone else.

Alastair, who has recently finished writing a PhD thesis on Vaneigem's work, speaks and reads French fluently, having lived and studied in Paris for some years. He is currently involved in a collaborative translation project of some of the writings of Anslem Jappe - such a project being itself an

excellent rebuttal to your scepticism. My competency is certainly the most 'primitive' of the four of us, but having recently returned from a three month visit to Paris, not to mention my ongoing commitment to the study of French and translating the Situationists, I hope that I will continue to improve. Certainly it has been thanks to the help of Bill and Alastair that the few translations I have made are better than what they otherwise would have been. Indeed such help opened to me the possibility of ongoing collaborative work.

Finally, you appear to hold a great deal of animus toward Bill. No doubt Bill is more than capable of defending himself from such. My problem is that apart from impugning his ability to translate the Situationists, you provide no details of such alleged 'incompetency.' I have found that Bill's work, not only translating the SI but perhaps more importantly keeping a situationist styled critique alive in the present, of inestimable value. Perhaps you have bridled at his criticisms of your translation work? Then why not engage in a public rebuttal of his criticism? As far as I am aware there has been no such attempt by you. I believe that Bill's pointed criticism of your choice of what to translate, or even of you more bizarre choices of what to excise from particular articles (e.g. Bernstein's 'No Useless Leniency' or the SI's 'Counter-Situationist Campaign in Various Countries'), raises important questions about how to represent the Situationists in translation. Our work is not just a question of fidelity to the language of the original, but also to its critical style.

It is my belief that collective and collaborative methods are necessarily a part of reconstituting a revolutionary movement because such methods are not only means to the end of revolutionary transformation, but are already implicated in the ends to which we struggle. No doubt such projects will be difficult, and will lead to disagreements and such like; but to wish us well while in essence damning the feasibility of such a project is surely disingenuous.

Regards,

Anthony Hayes