

Summary Note from Editions Gérard Lebovici on the difficulties of translating Guy Debord's *Panegyric*

By Guy Debord¹

I

The translation of *Panegyric*² presents many difficulties if it is entrusted to someone who is very competent and, if not, it is impossible. Thus it must not be undertaken in the conditions of deficiency that, for many years, have unfortunately dominated the practice of translation in European publishing. Those who refuse to understand that this book includes many traps³ and multiple meanings deliberately chosen, or those who do not find someone who is sufficiently qualified to be capable of not getting lost in it, must immediately abandon the ambition of publishing it in a foreign language, and thus leave this liberty to other, subsequent and more capable publishers.

At first, one must be aware that, behind the classical French – which, above all, one must discern and must know how to provide the foreign equivalent – a specially modern usage of this “classical language” is dissimulated, which is a novelty that is thus bizarre and shocking. A translation must render all of this, faithfully.

The greatest difficulty consists in this: this book certainly contains a good amount of information that must be translated exactly. But it is not essentially a matter of information. Essentially, the information resides in the very manner in which it is enunciated.

Each time – and this is quite frequent – that a word or a phrase has two possible meanings, one must recognize and maintain *them both*, because the phrase must be understood as entirely veracious in both senses. For the ensemble of the discourse, this also signifies: the totality of the possible meanings is the only truth.

To give a very general example of this effect, all the epigraphs to the chapters must obviously at first be understood as ironically directed against the author. But one must also sense that this is not a simple irony: must they ultimately be experienced as truly ironic? One must leave this doubt intact.

¹ Dated November 1989. Published in Guy Debord, *Panegyrique, Tome second*, Librairie Arthème Fayard, September 1997. Translated from the French by Bill Brown and published in *NOT BORED!* #41 (November 2009). Some changes made to the online version (notbored.org) in March 2014.

² Guy Debord's *Panegyric, Volume I* was published in 1989 by Editions Gérard Lebovici, and in translation by Verso Books in 1991, but in both cases without this “Summary Note,” which was a semi-confidential text. *Volume II* was written in 1991 but only published posthumously, by Fayard in 1997. Verso's *Panegyric: Volumes 1 & 2*, published in 2004, includes a translation of the “Summary Note” by John McHale, the translator of *Volume 2*.

³ Note the similarity to Debord's comments at the beginning of his book *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988): “The unhappiness of the times thus compels me, once again, to write in a new way. Some elements will be intentionally omitted; and the plan will have to remain rather unclear. Readers will encounter certain lures, like the very hallmark of the era.”

Different vocabularies (military, legal) are regularly employed according to certain subjects that are evoked, in the same way that the tones of the quotations from very diverse epochs are mixed into them. The translator must not be incapable of, nor surprised to, recognize in the language of the author (on several rare occasions) an unfamiliar word or a word from an argot. It was deliberately used, like salt, exactly to make the flavor of the others stand out. Likewise, sometimes irony is intimately mixed in with a lyrical tone, without taking away its positive seriousness.

It is in no way possible to conclude as to what the total and definitive meaning of this work might currently be: it exactly remains in suspense, since this is only the first volume. The end of the book finds itself projected beyond itself.⁴

The continuous *sliding* of the meaning, which is more or less manifest in each of the phrases, is also present in the general movement of the entire book. Thus the question of language is treated through strategy (chapter I); the passions of love through criminality (chapter II); the passage of time through alcoholism (chapter III); the attraction of places through their destruction (chapter IV); the attachment to subversion through the police repercussions that it continually causes (chapter V); aging through the world of war (chapter VI); [and] decadence through economic development (chapter VII).

One can in particular cite a phrase on page 41: “Between the rue du Four and the rue de Buci, where our youth was so completely lost, drinking several glasses, one could feel with certainty that we would never do better.”⁵ What exactly does this phrase mean? It means all that is possible to find in it. Scorning good classical rules, the apposition “drinking several glasses” can be linked, and here as a euphemism, to the preceding phrase; but it must *also* be linked to the phrase that follows it, and then it makes a figure of exact and instantaneous observation. But, beyond the subject represented by the [word] “one,” perhaps equally understood as being an outside observer (in this case, fully disapproving) and as being the subjective judgment of this youth (and, in this case, expressing a philosophically or cynically lucid satisfaction). Everything is true, one must not delete anything.⁶

⁴ Note that this is the case with the entire “series”: *Panegyric, Volume III* was destroyed on Debord’s orders the day he committed suicide, 30 November 1994.

⁵ In James Brook’s translation (Verso, 1991), page 29, this sentence is rendered thus: “Between the rue du Four and the rue de Buci, where are youth so completely went astray as a few glasses were drunk, one could feel certain that we would never do any better.” In the 2004 edition, there have been slight changes: “Somewhere between Rue du Four and Rue de Buci, where our youth was so completely lost, as a few glasses were drunk, one could feel certain that we would never do anything better.”(p. 26).

⁶ *Tout est vrai, il ne faut rien en retrancher*: in addition to the rendering we have offered, it can also be translated as “Everything is true, one must not reduce anything” or “Everything is true, one must not delete anything.” Reminiscent of a famous statement that Debord was especially fond of: “Nothing is true, everything is permitted” (see his letter to Jean-Paul Iommi-Amunategui dated 9 March 1986). In *his* translation of the “Summary Note,” included in the 2004 Verso edition of *Panegyric*, John McHale renders this sentence as “Everything is true, nothing must be excised.”

II

Considering the complexity of this book, a publisher must only entrust the task to a translator who is *familiar with classical French* (that is to say, books published before 1940) and, on the other hand, a good writer of prose in his own language. And, failing to find one, he would have to leave to another publisher the occasion to try to accomplish this task in suitable conditions, later on. The translator who is retained in answer to such criteria must soon after prove it, by submitting to the author attempts to translate the following passages.

Pages 13-14. From “My method . . .” to “the old society.”⁷

Pages 50-51 From “The majority of wines . . .” to “before the drinker.”⁸

Pages 75-76. From “I am quite interested . . .” to “I will leave others to conclude.”⁹

Pages 88-89. From “The pleasures of existence . . .” to “to suspect it would be devoted to the past.”¹⁰

It would also be necessary to have translated the phrase already evoked on page 41: “Between the rue du Four and the rue de Buci . . .”

Those who have satisfied these demands¹¹ will be able, of course, to subsequently ask the author for all clarifications that would appear desirable to understand several other points.

⁷ Cf. page 6 in James Brook’s 1991 translation, pages 5-6 in his translation of 2004, and pages 15-16 in the Gallimard edition of 1993. In both of his translations, Brook seems to miss the play on the word *plaindre*, which means both to pity *and* to complain: “What good is it to pity you?” (*a quoi bon vous plaindre?*) and “I do not intend to complain about anything” (*Je ne pense a me plaindre de rien*).

⁸ Pages 38-39 in the 1991 translation, page 34 in the 2004 translation, and pages 47-48 in the Gallimard edition. In neither of his translations does Brook really catch the last sentence, *De mémoire d’ivrogne, on n’avait jamais imaginé que l’on pouvait voir des boissons disparaître du monde avant le buveur*, which he renders as “In drinking memory, no one had ever imagined that he would see drink pass away before the drinker.” We believe it is better translated as “[Even] in a drunkard’s memory, one could never have imagined that one would see drink [itself] disappear from the world before the drinker.”

⁹ Pages 63-64 of the 1991 translation, and pages 69-70 in the Gallimard edition. We do not believe that Brook quite captures the closeness of the interplay between Debord’s manner of playing *Kriegspiel* and his manner of living his life. Where Brook reads, “I have played this game and, in the often difficult conduct of my life, I have utilized lessons from it – I have also set myself rules of the game for this life, and I have followed them,” we read, “I have played this game and, in the often difficult conduct of my life, I have utilized several lessons from it – for this life, I myself have also fixed a game-rule, and I have followed it.” In the 2004 translation, Brook changes “utilized” to “drawn a few” (pp. 55-56).

¹⁰ Pages 75-77 in the 1991 translation and pages 82-83 in the Gallimard edition.

¹¹ The historical record – such as it exists in the form of Guy Debord’s letters – shows that Verso submitted Brook’s translation to Debord, who approved it in a letter dated 4 April 1991, but also

III

The passage written in the jargon of the Coquillards¹² (pages 38-39) means this:¹³

There I knew several heads that lay in wait for the executioner: thieves and murderers. One could rely on them as accomplices, because they never hesitated to use force. They were often arrested by the police, but they were skillful in pretending to be innocents, [even] as far as misleading them. It was here that I learned how one must deceive those who interrogate you, with the result that for a long time afterwards and even here, in such affairs, I prefer to keep silent. Our violence and our pleasure on the earth are now faraway. Nevertheless, my comrades without money who so well understood this deceiving world: I remember them vividly: when we all ended up at the same meetings, at night in Paris.¹⁴

In a Spanish translation, this passage must be rendered in *germania* (or perhaps *caló*).¹⁵ In an English translation, one must use *cant*.¹⁶ A German translation must utilize *Rotwelsch*.¹⁷ The Italian must appeal to *furbesco*.¹⁸ The translator can use the help of a specialist here.¹⁹

required that several corrections be made before it was published. It is clear from the final published version that the very few of these corrections were in fact made.

¹² A band of brigands and discharged soldiers who were active in Burgundy in the 1450s. Their “slang” was used by the great French lyric poet Francois Villon (1431?-1463).

¹³ In Brook’s 1991 translation, this passage (pages 27-28) reads as follows: “There I met a few heads the executioner was waiting for: thieves and murderers. They were accomplices one could be proud of, for they never hesitated when it came to resorting to force. They were often picked up by the police, but they were good at feigning innocence and misleading them. That’s where I learned how to deceive interrogators, so that for a long time after, and here too, I’d rather remain silent about such business. Our acts of violence and our earthly delights are past. Yet I vividly recall my penniless comrades who understood so well this delusory world: when we met in our hangouts, in Paris at night.” In the 2004 translation, this passage is completely different and reads like a parody of the argot in *A Clockwork Orange*: “There I staggged a few kiddies the switcher was waiting for: prigs and millers. They were mobs you could trust, for they stood no repairs when it came to ramping . . . “ (pp. 24-25).

¹⁴ *quand nous nous retrouvions tous à nos mêmes rendez-vous, la nuit à Paris*: it seems that not only did these people meet *at* night, they also met the night *itself*.

¹⁵ *germania* means “gang talk” or “criminals’ slang”; and *caló* refers the language of Spanish gypsies.

¹⁶ Apparently derived from the Latin *cantus* and similar to “chant,” this word denotes a whining or singing speech used by beggars, thieves, etc.

¹⁷ Thieves’ Latin.

¹⁸ Lingo, also cunning.

¹⁹ In Debord’s case, he called upon the expertise of his wife, Alice Becker-Ho, the author of *L’Essence du Jargon* (Gallimard, 1994), *Les Princes du jargon* (Gallimard, 1995), and *Du jargon: Héritier en bastardie* (Gallimard, 2002).

IV

As for the quotations for which the name of the author is not provided, one encounters, in this order:²⁰

Page 16 [page 8/page 7], Cardinal de Retz.

Page 35 [page 25/page 23], Queen Anne of Austria.²¹

Page 36 [page 25/page 23], the phrase “the spirit turns . . . so as to flow again” is a paraphrase of Ecclesiastes.²²

Page 39 [page 28/page 25], a popular song from the 17th century; a proverb from Auvergne.

Page 51 [page 35/page 30], a quick evocation of the poet Nicolas Gilbert.

Page 53 [page 37/page 33], Machiavelli in an letter to Vettori dated 10 December 1513.

Page 59 [page 47/page 41], Dante in Italian and a Biblical quotation (Psalms XXXVIII, 12-13).²³

Page 60 [page 48/page 41], [in Spanish] a song from the Asturias.

Page 64 [page 50/page 44] a frequent image in Chinese poetry.

Page 73 [page 59/page 51], two quotations from Pascal.

Page 77 [pages 64-65/pages 56-57], the quotations are first from Vauvenargues, then from a chronicler of the 15th century.

Page 78 [page 65/page 56], the first quotation is from Charles d’Orleans, the second is from the King of England, William of Orange.

Page 88 [page 76/page 66], reverses another Biblical quotation (“Wisdom has built its house . . .,” Proverbs IX).

²⁰ In what follows, we have placed the page numbers in the two James Brook/Verso translations (1991 and 2004, respectively) in brackets [page X/page Y].

²¹ *Austria?* Both of the Brook/Verso translations refer to “an angry queen of France,” as does the French original. Anne was in fact the Archduchess of Austria by birth, but she was the wife of Louis XIII and regent during the infancy of her son, Louis XIV.

²² In the 1991 translation, the Biblical passage is rendered as “the spirit whirls in all directions, and on its circuits the spirit returns” (p. 25), while in the 2004 version it is rendered as “The spirit whirlleth about continually, and the spirit returneth again according to its circuits” (p. 23).

²³ As a matter of fact, Psalms XXXVIII, 12-13 says this, “Those who seek my life lay their snares, those who seek my hurt speak of ruin, and meditate treachery all the day long,” and *not* “Do not stay silent, for I come before you as a stranger and a traveler. Grant me some refreshment before I go away and am here no more,” which in fact comes from Psalm XXXIX, 12-13. Given Debord’s reference to “laying snares” in the first passage, it is possible that this substitution is not a mistake, but a kind of test of the reader/translator’s abilities. (Note well Debord’s comment concerning the composition of Jean-Pierre Baudet’s book on Chernobyl in his letter to Floriana Lebovici dated 3 October 1986: “But among so many other good citations in the exergue, it seems to me that one must slip in a parodic one.”) In *his* translation of the “Summary Note,” John McHale corrects Debord’s original so that it reads “Psalm 39:12-13” (*Panegyric: Volumes 1 & 2*, p. 177).

The quotation on pages 89-90 [page 77-78/pages 66-67] is from Guy Debord (thesis 46 of *The Society of the Spectacle*).

The last phrase of the book [page 79/page 68] is the traditional formula of conclusion for the Spanish authors of the Golden Century.²⁴

One supposes that the attributed quotations will not present particular difficulties and can be located easily. It will indeed be imperative to use the original text each time that they come from the same language into which one is translating my book. If not, it would at least be necessary to use the translations of these quotations that might already exist in the country, if they are authoritative (for example, in the case of the *ancient* adaptations of the Bible: in German or English). Nevertheless, in cases in which other translations, existing for a shorter period of time, appear to be bad or only mediocre, it will obviously be necessary to improve or re-do them.

²⁴ This sentence does not appear in *Panegyric: Volumes 1 & 2*, p. 177.