# Portraits for translation

## Critical review of the book *Les traducteurs dans l'histoire* edited by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth❧

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In 2014, the book *Les traducteurs dans l'histoire* underwent its third French edition. This new edition was coordinated by Benoit Léger in collaboration with three students of Concordia University, Alex Gauthier, Dominique Pelletier and Simon Saint-Onge. First published in 1995 and edited by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth (in French at the University of Ottawa Press/UNESCO Publishing; in English at John Benjamins Publishing Company/UNESCO Publishing), this unique bilingual work began to diverge at the time of the second edition: the second French edition was published by the University of Ottawa Press in 2007, and a revised edition was published in English a few years later by John Benjamins Publishing Company in 2012. Several translations of the book have been published in the meantime, in Portuguese (*Os tradutores na história*, Editora Ática, 1998, translated by Sérgio Bath), in Spanish (*Los traductores en la historia*, Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, 2005, translation coordinated by Martha Pulido), in Arabic by Mohammed Mahmoud Mustafa in 2006 (*Al-mutarğemūn 'abr al-tārīkh*, Kuwait, المترجمون عبر التاريخ : محمد محمود مصطفى) and in Romanian (*Traducătorii în istorie*, Editura Universitătii de Vest, 2008, translation coordinated by Georgiana Lungu-Badea)[1].

The third French edition being the translation of the second English edition, it somehow restores the equivalence between the two editions lost from the second English edition onward (a loss of equivalence which made it difficult to use the book in the context of a French and English, bilingual course). The differences had appeared following new research in the field of the history of translation. In this regard, the French 2007 edition already noted some changes, particularly in the entries on the "Toledo School" that had been preserved despite the work of Clara Foz (*Le Traducteur, l'Église et le Roi*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1998), among others, who questioned the very existence of this "school"[2]. This latest edition still retains mention of the Toledo School but insists on its mythical quality, keeping it as an archive for the memory of this episode that was less about the history of translation as such than about the history of the history of translation.

Overall, there are no great differences, thematically, in this third edition, although new sections have made their appearance: the contribution of computer technologies to translation (chapter 4), a longer discussion on the new vision of translation in the 21st century (conclusion of chapter 5), and a section on the translation of Eastern sacred texts (conclusion of chapter 6, with a small section on the sinologist James Legge). Most changes occur in references that have been added since the beginning of the project, as well as in the general reflection on history offered by the book. In this regard, Judith Woodsworth describes in the foreword the main trends of this transformation:

> Whereas traditional history tended to look at momentous events and the "great deeds of great men", recent decades have seen an increasing number of scholars focus on ordinary people and attempt to tell "history from below". Historians of translators are adopting this vantage point to good effect. For

❧ French translation coordinated by Benoit Léger with the collaboration of Alex Gauthier, Dominique Pelletier and Simon Saint-Onge, third edition, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2014, 402 p.

* The English version of this text was reviewed by Simon Labrecque.

[1] Information available on the personal webpage of Jean Delisle (University of Ottawa).

[2] Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, "Foreword" to the second French edition, *Les traducteurs dans l'histoire*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 2007, p. xxi.

> millennia, translators have accompanied the "great men" in their "great deeds", but they have been defined by their subordinate status (as captives, slaves or ethnic hybrids, for example). Yet, their social, cultural and geographic identities have allowed them to cross borders, negotiate across cultures and contribute to intellectual and cultural exchange. Just as decolonization, feminism and identity politics have transformed historical writing, so, too, have they made their mark on the narratives of translation[3].

If the book has managed to grow by regular additions over time, it is still *unfinished*: its construction is still ongoing.

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The book *Les traducteurs dans l'histoire* can easily be read by a non-specialist audience. It is also addressed to those who are curious about the history of a literature that is usually not covered, translation as such, and it may be of interest to those who practise translation (of literary or other kinds) and who would like to open themselves to original ways of translating. However, the target audience remains students of translation enrolled in the course "History of translation" that is typically offered in translation programs in universities.

First conceived as a kind of synthesis divided into themes, the book can hardly be read continuously, for the repetitions can be tiresome. This was one of the criticisms that the book received after the first edition, and the second French edition had answered it:

[3] Judith Woodsworth, « Foreword to the second edition », *Translators through History*, Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth (eds.), revised and expanded by Judith Woodsworth, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2012, p. xiii-xiv. The new edition in French gives a translation of this foreword.





> It would be wrong to see repetitions that we have missed. […] The vast and complex work of exceptional translators [Chaucer, Caxton, Tyndale, Luther], whose multiple contributions are essential, largely justifies the fact that they appear in more than one chapter. In each chapter, a particular aspect of their contribution is addressed[4].

Indeed, Luther is essential to understand changes in the viewpoint that translators have adopted toward sacred texts in modernity, and he is also important to understand the power struggles between the Princes and the Church in the Renaissance, or even the contribution of translators to the development and establishment of the contemporary German language. The chosen thematizations at the beginning have their advantages and disadvantages, arising from the choice of the themes which, in many respects, overlap. This is probably due to the fact that history cannot be "cut" uniformly, that there are several ways to perceive history in order to divide it: by historical eras (antiquity, middle ages, modernity), by types of translations or textual productions (religious translation – the translation of the Qur'an is found in three different chapters –, literary or theatrical translations, but also the emergence of dictionaries, or even conference interpretation, which both have their own chapter), or geographical or linguistic areas (a discussion on translation into indigenous languages can be found in the first chapter on the inventors of alphabets, but translation into modern Hebrew will be found in the second chapter on national languages, after the section on Swedish translators and the evolution of the Gbaya in Cameroon; Irish Gaelic will even be found in chapter 3, on translators as producers of national literatures). It is perhaps necessary to simply mention that the book must not be taken as a custom-made "manual" for a course on the history of translation; it should be recast and reworked by the teacher according to the divisions s/he wants to focus on[5].

[4] Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, « Foreword » to the second French edition, *op. cit.*, p. xx-xxi; my translation.

[5] One example: in a course on the history of translation taught in the Fall of 2014, I asked my students to read the first chapter of the book about the creators of alphabets in two parts, Ulfila (Gothic), Mesrop Mashtots

This disparity between the themes, which still remain somewhat incommensurable among one another, carries the trace of a still unfixed disciplinary work. Despite recent publications and the great success of a book like *Les traducteurs dans l'histoire*, the history of translation does not constitute, it seems to me, a discipline or even an academic field. Very often, researchers in this field have institutional ties out of translation studies, and academic publications are rather concerned with translation in general[6]. I would take the liberty to offer an explanation of this phenomenon: the absence of institutions in the history of translation would be the sign that the field is open to several disciplines, if not to all disciplines. In effect, the knowledge circulating today in academia all passed, at one time or another, through translation, and this process of translation has a history. The field "history of translation" is, in this regard, a "melting-pot" where diverse hypotheses on the development of knowledge, arts, literature, etc., can be confronted.

For s/he who belongs to neither the practice of translation nor to a program in translation studies, what image could one have of the history of translation after having read this book? I propose two

(Armenian) and Cyril and Methodius (Old Slavonic) as a first step for a class on the translation of the Bible in the Middle Ages, and James Evans (Cree syllabic) for a second class on the translation of the Bible in modernity. What was omitted in the book, in my opinion, was the distinction between the first group – who are translators translating into their own language – and the latter translators who translate in parallel with a mission to evangelize indigenous peoples. The distinction allowed me to present a different way of conceptualizing the uses of the translation of sacred texts. Again, this work of readjustment is necessary if one wants to be able to use the book in class. Division of the chapters into fairly uniform subsections allows to do it quite easily.

[6] If the history of translation may be a common theme, institutionally, researchers involved are, very often, not affiliated to departments of translation, but rather to departments of "national" or comparative literatures, or, in the case of translations of religious texts, in theological studies (Christian or Koranic) departments. If the interest of historical research can focus on translation, I am not aware, for my part, of any institution (departments, associations or research centers) exclusively dedicated to this field.





possibilities, and add a third one that would somehow outline a program for future research.

The first possibility is to conclude that the objective of the translation of history is, in the form of "portraits", to understand the conditions of possibility of a literary practice that aims to make a speech uttered in a language understandable to a person who does not speak this language. In this sense, we would find quite fascinating examples of this history in the book, from the creators of alphabets to makers of national languages, with artisans whose personalities are often very strong (I think of Étienne Dolet in particular) or with practices that may seem very different from the current ideas that we hold about translation.

A second possibility could be mentioned, even if it is less easily discernable in the book. It concerns the conceptions of translation that have been formulated throughout history. We tend to simplify the problem by opposing two types of translation, meaning-for-meaning and word-to-word, as described by Jerome of Stridon, but there are a variety of reflections on translation that it is possible to deduce from the paratexts like prefaces, or even from autonomous texts, that allow us to map an intellectual history of the practice of translation. This is a history in the *longue durée* that involves not only the context of elaboration of this reflection on translation, but also various responses that were offered over time to common problems and issues. To portraits of translators, we can thus add a series of intellectual "landscapes" of translation. This way to think about history also has its disadvantages, for it presuppose an equivalence between the thought of the authors of these texts and their own translational practice, between the projects that translators present and the products they can manage to achieve, which is not always the case. The advantages, however, concern the possibility of situating students in their own relationships to translation, and this approach can even provide materials to question anew ancient practices and to ultimately question the current "unthoughts" on translation.

A third possibility concerns the possibility of doing the history of the history of translation, that is to say, to question how research has been and is carried on the history of translation, a question which, to speak Bourdieusian, engages the reproduction of the disciplinary

"field" that is the history of translation. To reformulate this concern differently, we can ask: how can we *instil a taste* for the history of translation in students who generally judge the course useless in their academic curricula? The book, as an introduction to historical practices, allows this instillation perhaps less by what it says than by the grey areas that are left in it. *Les traducteurs dans l'histoire* is not a universal and comprehensive encyclopaedia; not everything is told about the history of translation; more research remains to be done, and having to use the book for a class may allow to bring to light what is left open, or even what we are getting rid of too hastily.

In this regard, in the course given in the Fall of 2014, I let the students do a personal research on a topic of their choice. First, I somewhat regretted this decision, and I confess having been a little disappointed by the results, but I was satisfied with the reflection they had at the end of the course, as they expressed a regret for not having been given more opportunities to write research papers before this course. Indeed, many of the problems I encountered can be traced back to a lack of experience that could be easily surpassed if students had to write more research papers in their academic program. The book *Les traducteurs dans l'histoire* is then a good basis to determine a theme or topic that the students can invest, depending also on the knowledge they already have. In the use of the book for teaching, it is therefore necessary to take advantage of *what is not said* in the book, each time to determine *what is missing*, that is to say, what gives the desire to continue to pursue the investigation and to try to understand a phenomenon. Research has never meant anything else.

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The third possibility to think the history of translation is not a reflexive possibility that is only once you have exhausted the others. On the contrary, it seems to me to be the first possibility that one encounters as soon as one has access to a translation in its *historial* nature. An event that took place in my class made me think about this issue when, in the session dedicated to French humanism, I





presented Étienne Dolet (1509-1546), a poet, a printer and a translator. This character is known and continues to be taught for having introduced the term "*traducteur*" in French and for a "bad" translation of Plato. Indeed, Dolet added three words ("rien du tout", or "anything at all") to an argument about the immortality of the soul after death ("when you have died, death will also not be able to do anything, since you will no longer be *anything at all*"). This translation was judged heretical by the Faculty of theology of the University of Paris and Dolet was burned alive in 1546. Dolet is taught for a third reason: in 1540, he published a short treatise entitled *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en autre*, composed of five very simple rules. Let us recall that, a the time of writing, translation was overwhelmingly done from scholarly languages – Greek and Latin – into new "national" languages, like French. Here are the five rules in Dolet's French:

1) En premier lieu, il fault que le traducteur entende parfaictement le sens et la matiere de l'autheur qu'il traduit;
2) La seconde chose qui est requise en traduction, c'est que le traducteur ait parfaicte congnoissance de la langue de l'autheur qu'il traduict;
3) Le tiers poinct est qu'en traduisant il ne se fault pas asseruir iusques à la que l'on rende mot pour mot;
4) La quatriesme reigle que ie veulx bailler en cest endroict, est plus à obseruer en langues non reduictes en art, qu'en autres […]. S'il aduient doncques que tu traduises quelque liure Latin en icelles [l'Italienne, l'Hespaignole, celle d'Allemaigne, d'Angleterre, et autres vulgaires], mesmement en la Francoyse, il te fault garder d'vsurper mots trop approchans du Latin, et peu vsitez par le passé : mais contente toy du commun, sans innouer aucunes dictions follement, et par curiosité reprehensible;
5) La cinquiesme reigle que doibt obseruer vn bon traducteur […] rien autre chose que l'obseruation des nombres oratoires : c'est asscauoir vne liaison et assemblement des dictions auec telle doulceur, que non seulement l'ame s'en

> contente, mais aussi les oreilles en sont toutes rauies, et ne se faschent iamai d'vne telle harmonie de langage[7].

One of the exercises given in class was to explain how historical reflections on translation could be useful today. All students responded unanimously – should we be surprised? – that Dolet's first three rules and the last one were still useful and could even be applied as such today. The fourth rule, however, was problematic. Three responses were proposed: 1) the rule should be erased, since nobody has to translate from Latin these days; 2) the equivalent of Latin today is English (or any other foreign language), so Dolet is saying that we must avoid calques or loan words; or, finally, 3) the equivalent of Latin today is not a foreign language, but a language "too scientific or technical", so Dolet is saying that we must simplify the translated language depending on the target audience. In short, the students all had the reflex to "contemporarize" the problem – they could very well have answered that Dolet's rules were useful for the understanding of the practice of translation at the time of the Renaissance (the past *for* the part). They did so from their "translatological" knowledge which often operates in a binary mode

[7] Étienne Dolet, *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en autre*, Lyon, 1540. A translation by David G. Ross is available in Douglas Robinson, *Western Translation Theory. From Herodotus to Nietzsche*, St. Jerome Publishing, 2002, p. 95-97 : "1) First, the translator must have a perfect grasp of the meaning of what he is translating [;] 2) The second thing required for translation is that the translator have a perfect familiarity with the language of the author being translated [;] 3) The third point is that one must not give in to translating word for word [;] 4) The fourth rule that I wish to provide in this work is more often observed in artistically unrefined languages than in others […]. If you should find yourself translating a Latin work into one of these languages [Italian, Spanish, German, English, and other common tongues], even into French, take care not to usurp words that are too close to Latin and not traditionally used. Rather content yourself with normal diction, without allowing reprehensible curiosity to inspire any extravagant neologisms [;] 5) Let us now turn to the fifth rule a good translator must observe […]. Nothing but following the principles of rhetorical harmony, to wit the words must be assembled and liaised so skillfully that not only is the soul contented but the ears, never having known such linguistic harmony, are enraptured."





with dichotomies like target-/source-oriented translation or foreignizing/domesticating translation.

This example involves interpretation and has practical consequences for several disciplines because it asks: how should we interpret the past *for* the present? Here, it is useful to consider another example. Charles Le Blanc recently translated and published *De interpretatione recta* by Leonardo Bruni Aretino (1374-1444) in French, in a version that seeks to be as close as possible to the original. Indeed, Le Blanc does not only translate a historical discourse on translation; as this discourse offers something like a methodology, his translation itself becomes the application of this very method. In this regard, the translator recalls in the introduction that "humanism" is a return to ancient texts, and that Bruni's view of translation remains consistent with such a return because it calls for a return to the *originality* of the text to be translated and for a transmission of this "origin" of the text through a translation that should be a perfect "replica" of the original. In his book *The Hermes Complex*, Le Blanc expresses his own view as a continuation of Bruni's:

> This desire to go back to beginnings, to rediscover the origin in and for itself, made it imperative to develop both the science of philology and a much-needed methodology of translation. When Leonardo Bruni writes: "…the excellent translator will throw himself heart, mind and soul into the work of the first author, he will *become* the work, so to speak, in order to express its structure, stance, movement, colours and all its myriad traits", he is clearly demanding that the translation be a perfect replica of the original. Any interventions of the translator in the text will be considered errors – violations of methodological norms designed to ensure his invisibility. What should transpire through the translated text is more than mere denotation: what the translation should convey, above all, is a way of being, a diction and a style of thinking – all of which should ideally be those of the Ancients, though they are all too often those of the translator. A reading-based

approach to translation brings all these phenomena into focus[8].

Therefore, it is useful to read Le Blanc's translation of Bruni and to compare it to others. For example, in a passage, we can read (first in Bruni's Latin, then in French, finally in a very literal translation of Le Blanc's French translation):

> Quid de verbis in greco relictis dicam, que tam multa sunt, ut semigreca quedam eius interpretatio videatur? Atqui nihil grece dictum est, quod latine dici non possit! Et tamen dabo veniam in quibusdam paucis admodum peregrinis et reconditis, si nequeant commode in latinum traduci. Enim vero, quorum optima habemus vocabula, ea in greco relinquere ignorantissimum est. Quid enim tu mihi « politiam » reliquis in greco, cum possis et debeas latino verbo « rem publicam » dicere? Cur tu mihi « oligarchiam » et « democratiam » et « aristocratiam » mille locis inculcas et aures legentium insuasissimis ignotissimisque nominibus offendis, cum illorum omnium optima et usitatissima vocabula in latino habeamus? Latini enim nostri « paucorum potentiam » et « popularem statum » et « optimorum gubernationem » dixerunt. Utrum igitor hoc modo latine prestat dicere, an verba illa, ut iacent, in greco relinquere?
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> Que devrais-je dire alors des mots laissés en grec, lesquels sont si nombreux qu'il semble que la traduction soit, pour ainsi dire, en grec pour la moitié? Et pourtant rien ne se peut dire en grec qui ne le peut en langue latine! J'omets certains passages exotiques et abstrus que l'on ne peut, certes, traduire facilement, mais c'est un signe d'abyssale ignorance que de laisser en grec des mots pour lesquels il existe des correspondants. Pourquoi parler de « *politie* » [πολιτεία] si l'on a le mot « république » que l'on peut et doit utiliser? Pourquoi en mille endroits placer « oligarchie », « démocratie » et « aristocratie » offensant ainsi les oreilles des lecteurs avec des mots tout aussi peu d'usage qu'ils sont

[8] Charles Le Blanc, *The Hermes Complex. Philosophical Reflections on Translation*, trans. Barbara Folkart, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 2012, §125.





> connus, tandis qu'il existe pour eux tous des mots excellents et for utilisés?* Les auteurs latins disaient, quant à eux, « pouvoir de la minorité », « état populaire » et « gouvernement des meilleurs ». Est-ce donc préférable de s'en remettre à l'usage ou bien aux néologismes?**[9]
>
> What should I say then of words left in Greek, which are so numerous that it seems that the translation is, so to speak, Greek for a half? Yet nothing can be said in Greek that cannot be said in Latin! I omit some exotic and abstruse passages that we cannot, of course, translate easily, but it is a sign of abysmal ignorance to leave in Greek words for which there are corresponding ones. Why talk of "polity" [πολιτεία] if one has the word "republic" that can and should be used? Why put in a thousand places "oligarchy", "democracy" and "aristocracy", thereby offending the readers' ears with words that are as little used as they are known, while there are for them all of those excellent words and usages?* Latin authors said, meanwhile, "power of the minority", "people's State" and "government of the best". Is it better, then, to rely on usage or on neologisms?**

There are two end notes for this excerpt that are (in French, then the translation):

> [71] [*] Ce passage, surréaliste pour des lecteurs de notre époque, possède néanmoins un intérêt pour la traductologie en ce qu'il montre que Bruni dénie à la traduction le droit d'introduire des mots, des expressions et des métaphores nouvelles qui pourraient enrichir la langue d'arrivée.
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> [72] [**] Sans forcer le texte, nous proposons ici une traduction par le sens afin d'assurer une certaine unité au discours de l'Arétin. Le texte latin dit littéralement : « Est-il donc préférable de dire ainsi, en latin, ou bien de laisser comme ils sont les mots grecs?[10] »

[9] Leonardo Bruni, *De interpretatione recta / De la traduction parfaite*, trans. Charles Le Blanc, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 2008, §43, p. 118-119.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

> * This passage, surrealistic for readers of our time, nevertheless has an interest for translation studies in that it shows that Bruni denies to translation the right to introduce new words, expressions and metaphors that could enrich the target language.
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> ** Without forcing the text, we propose here a translation from the sense in order to ensure a certain unity to the discourse of the Aretian. The Latin text literally says: Is it therefore preferable to say so, in Latin, or leave the Greek words as they are?

Le Blanc chooses, for the last part of the translation cited above, to somewhat transform the text and make it contemporary, but he does so in a slightly paradoxical way: he uses the word "*néologisme*", which is itself not only a neologism, but also, literally, a composition of two loan words from ancient Greek (νέος and λόγος). It is interesting to compare this paragraph translated by Le Blanc with other translations of Bruni's text, for example in English and in Portuguese, where the choice of the translator was different (I cite only the last part, where Greek words are used):

> Why, tell me, do you leave *politeia* in Greek, when you can and ought to use the Latin words *res public*? Why obtrude in a thousand places the words *democratia* and *oligarchia* and *aristocratia*, and offend the ears of your readers with outlandish and unfamiliar terns when we have excellent and widely used terms for all of them in Latin? For we Latins say « the power of a few » (*paucorum potentia*) and « popular constitution » (*popularis status*) and « rule of the best » (*optimorum gubernatio*). Is it best to use Latin in this way, or to leave the words as they are in Greek?[11]
>
> Por que, pois, me deixas em grego *politeia*, quando podes e deves dizer a palavra latina *res publica*? Por que tu me repetes em mil passagens *oligarchia*, *democratia*, *aristocratia*, e feres os ouvidos dos leitores com nomes dos mais desaconselhados e desconhecidos, quando temos em latim vocábulos muitíssimo excelentes e usados para todos eles? Pois nossos latinos disseram *paucorum potentia* [poder de poucos], e *popularis status* [estado popular], e *optimorum gubernatio* [governo dos nobres]. Por isso, é melhor falar deste modo em latim ou deixar aquelas palavras em grego como estão?[12]

One does not need to read Portuguese here to easily see that the "Greek" words have been transcribed and that the Latin equivalents remain in the text. In both cases, a marked intervention by the translator is visible: in English, the Latin words are in parentheses; in Portuguese, they are included in the text, but a translation is provided between square brackets ("power of the few", "People's state" and "government of the nobles").

The intervention by the translator, whatever it is, in one case as in the others, is not superficial and inconsequential, it has implications; aesthetical ones, of course, but also political and ethical implications for the "dialogue" that the translator has with both the author and his or her contemporaries. However, it is useless here to decide who translates best or who is better able to bring the reader of the translation "to" the original author; it is also useless to compare the intentions of one or the other in terms of fidelity to the historical past. In effect, we have to take into account the fact that a translation of historical texts always implies a "contemporanization" of the texts. In this inevitable transformation of the text, a dual lens is needed that takes into account the *address* of the author, but also the *address* of the translator[13]. A history of translation in "landscapes" in parallel with a history of "portraits" seems to be necessary to

[11] Leonardo Bruni, "On the Correct Way to Translate", trans. James Hankins, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni. Selected Texts*, Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins et David Thompson (dir.), Binghamton, New York, Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1987, p. 228.

[12] Leonardo Bruni, "Da tradução correta", trans. Mauri Furlan, *Scientia Traductionis*, no. 10, Pós-Graduação em Estudos da Tradução (PGET), Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 2011, p. 45.

[13] With my colleague Simon Labrecque, from a classical debate between the "textualism" of the Straussian school and the "contextualism" of the Cambridge School of political thought, we have tried to conceptualize the problem in an article published in the third issue of the journal *Le Cygne noir* (Spring 2015).

complete the reflection already undertaken in this field by adding a "translation of history" to the "history of translation". In this regard, translation studies as a discipline has something to bring to all the disciplines of the humanities, as well as to the social sciences. If the institutionalization of the "history of translation" is not completed, it may be because it is opened to researchers from other disciplines who can see therein an interest for their own research.