How to do things with translation. Jean-Paul Marat's translation of Newton's *Optics* (1787)

Patrick Leech, University of Bologna

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This paper has two starting points. The first is the increasing interest in the field of translation studies in the figure of the translating subject. Since Douglas Robinson's "turn" towards translators (1991), increasing attention has been paid to the actors themselves in the process of translation in order to illuminate exactly what happens in a translation and why. Translators' "agency", the ways that translators can act autonomously within a given cultural system, has been emphasised (Milton and Bandia 2009; Chesterman 2009), also with reference to specific conditions or "habitus" within which he or she works (Bourdieu 1984; Milton and Bandia 2009: 8-10; Simeoni 1998). The focus on the translator involves also a methodological shift: analysts have to look not only at text and paratext (Batchelor 2018) but also "extra-textual" material in order to "thicken" their knowledge of the contextual determinants of a translation (Munday 2014; Appiah 2012 [1983]).

The second relates to translation history. The present-focus of much translation studies leads us to consider the translator from the point of view of the nature of his or her professional commitment (see for example, Dam and Korning Zethsen 2009). If we look at translations in a historical perspective, on the other hand, as Peter Burke (2005) points out, a majority of those involved in translating are not translating professionals at all but instead people from different walks of life whose participation in the world of translation is just a part of their overall activity. For many historical figures, translation was only "one leg of a multifarious career" (Pym 2009: 33). In order to understand fully the motives and constraints behind

a translation, it can be crucial to locate the translation within the other activities and concerns of the translator. The analysis of a historical translation, in other words, takes us back to the questions of who, why, what, for whom and how which Peter Burke (2007) indicated some time ago as the appropriate starting point for translation history. It also takes us towards an interdisciplinary approach to translation history, where the questions and problems regarding a given translation are explored within a specific historical context and not only as part of a larger diachronic history of translation (Rundle 2012; 2014). This article will look at one example of a translation and its specific historical context, a translation into French of Isaac Newton's *Optics*. It was undertaken by an individual whose name, indeed, has not been associated with translation but, instead, with his "multifarious career" as journalist and politician during the French Revolution: Jean Paul Marat.

1. Jean- Paul Marat: scientist and experimenter

In 1787, a new French version of Newton's *Optics*, his great work on colours and light, was published in Paris. It had first appeared in English in 1704, subsequently reaching a cultivated European readership first with a Latin version published in 1706, and then, in 1722, with a translation into French by the Huguenot translator Pierre Coste in an edition which was to become the standard one throughout the eighteenth century (Baillon 2009). Jean Paul Marat's 1787 translation promoted itself as innovatory: as an explicit rejection of the previous, standard translation. In order to fully understand this particular translation, to understand the ways in which it proposed itself as new, and to appreciate what Marat hoped to "do" with this translation, it is necessary to pay some particular attention to its specific historical context, and, indeed, to flesh out the figure of Marat.

Jean Paul Marat (1743-1793) is known today, mostly in negative terms, as an almost emblematic figure of the French Revolution. Almost uniformly referred to as ugly, his particular form of eczema led to skin blisters which certainly did not increase his physical attractiveness, and whose effects he attempted to mitigate

with long baths in sulphur water. His role in the French Revolution is remembered as that of a radical and vituperative journalist, editor of the *Ami du People*, a newspaper known for its popular stance and its uncompromising denunciations of "aristocrats", a category which could be expanded to include a variety of figures whom Marat, or others in the popular movement, identified as enemies of the Revolution. Something of a caricature, this is nevertheless the rather unfortunate historical reputation of one who, in his lifetime at least, was feted as a revolutionary hero. His violent death, stabbed in his bath by Charlotte Corday, a supporter of the supposedly moderate Girondin faction, and famously depicted by Jacques-Louis David, encapsulates his historical legacy (Schama 1989: 731-739).

Less well-known are Marat's life and experiences before the Revolution. As an ambitious medical student from Geneva, in 1765 Marat arrived in London where he was to spend the next 11 years of his life attempting to make a name for himself as a doctor and scientist, first in the capital and later in Newcastle.[1] In this period he wrote, in English, an *Essay on the Human Soul* (1772) followed by *A Philosophical Essay on man* (1773), the latter of which was translated into French and published by the radical printer and bookseller Marc-Michel Rey in Amsterdam (Eisenstein 1992: 118-130) under the title *De l'homme*. The work elicited a "caustic rejoinder" from Voltaire (Conner 1998: 37; Gillispie 1980: 291), and this rejection by the Enlightenment establishment was, perhaps, a pointer towards Marat's later rejection by the scientific establishment. These philosophical treatises were followed by two scientific tracts, a 21-page pamphlet entitled *An Essay on Gleets* (1775),[2] and in 1776 a pamphlet on eye disease in which he attacked the supposed ignorance of the Royal Society on the question of optics (Gillispie 1980: 295). Together with these philosophical and scientific writings, Marat also published a radical republican work, *The Chains of Slavery (1774)*, which attacked the monarchy and the theories of Enlightened despotism of Voltaire. This was later to be issued in French during the republican phase of

[1] For accounts of Marat's life see Conner (1998), Gaudenzi and Satolli (1989) and Gottschalk (1967).

[2] A "gleet" is a rare or obsolete term signifying a liquid discharge from a wound or ulcer (OED).

the French Revolution, in 1792 (Gottschalk 1967: 4-8; Hammersley 2010: 144-146). We may note here that, whereas Marat's later journalism had a popular readership as its target, *The Chains of Slavery* was a lavish 300-page book printed in quarto on fine linen paper and cost the princely sum of twelve shillings (Gillispie 1980: 300). If it was a work which attacked the political establishment, its intended readership was certainly not the popular one of Marat's later revolutionary journalism.

In 1777 Marat returned to Paris and in the period until the outbreak of the Revolution wrote eight books on scientific subjects: fire, electricity and light. In this period, far from being a political journalist involved in the radical ferment of French politics, Marat was spending all his energy trying to gain recognition within the scientific establishment (Conner 1998: 42-147). As well as writing, he carried out a series of public experiments, in the Newtonian tradition, one even attended by Benjamin Franklin, the American ambassador in Paris at the time (Gillispie 1980: 304; Gottschalk 1967: 11). The key institution that Marat had to persuade in order to gain this recognition was the Académie Royale des Sciences. He set about courting this institution, as well as participating in competitions launched by the provincial Academies in Bordeaux, Dijon, Lyon and Montpellier, and proposing himself as a candidate for the directorship of the projected academy of the sciences in Spain (Conner 1998: 45-52).

The Academy of Sciences did take some interest in Marat's productions, and attended his experiments on a number of occasions in the period 1779-1780. The judgement of the Academy on his *Découvertes sur la lumière* (1780) in which these experiments were described, however, was decidedly lukewarm:

> …since they are in general contrary to what is most fully known in *Optics*, we believe that it would be useless to enter into any detail [and] we do not regard them as anything … to which the Academy can give its sanction or accord (cit. in Gillispie 1980: 307).

Marat's response to this rejection was to publish the text in defiance of the Academy's response, demanding in the preface that it should be judged not by academicians but by "an enlightened and impartial public… the supreme tribunal whose decrees scientific bodies are themselves forced to respect" (*ibid*.). Marat

also wrote a reply to the Academy, roundly accusing them of not taking his theories seriously and refusing to replicate his experiments. He also pointed out a number of ways in which his theory of light was innovative with respect to Newtonian orthodoxy (*ibid*.). The following years saw Marat expounding his own theories of light and heat in public experiments in Paris, theories which called some of the tenets of Newtonian science into question, and increasingly challenging the Academy which had rejected him (*ibid*.: 317). His energetic iconoclastic intervention into the world of Newtonian science was, according to the historian of science, Charles Gillipsie, characteristic of Marat's general approach to established scientific knowledge: his writings in other areas, into which Marat "read voraciously", similarly "dismissed existing knowledge as radically insane"(*ibid*.: 314).

2. Marat's translation of Newton's *Optics*

These biographical details provide a context within which to collocate Marat's translation of Newton's *Optics*. Marat had worked as a language teacher in Geneva, had spent a considerable period in Britain and already written and translated into English.[3] As well as scientific competence, albeit not recognized at the highest level, Marat clearly also had considerable competence in English. Who better qualified to issue a new translation of Newton's *Optics*? What better means of displaying his linguistic and scientific competences than offering his own translation of this work? But given the accepted status of the existing

[3] The issue of whether the *Chains of Slavery* (1774) was written in English or translated from a French original has not been resolved. Hammersley's analysis (2010: 138-146) concentrates on the content and pays little attention to the question of language. Gillispie argues that "it is clear from his style that he had written his drafts in French and translated them into English…" (1980: 300) but provides no evidence to support this claim.

translation, the 1772 version by Pierre Coste, a strong paratextual framing of this new translation was necessary.[4]

As we shall see, this framing was part of Marat's general assault on scientific orthodoxy and his attempt to gain recognition by the Academy of Sciences. The translation itself, however, in the opinion of the historian of science Charles Gillispie, was "excellent", "nowhere unfaithful to Newton's meaning", and in regard to the great man himself, the tone was "impeccable, respectful without being adulatory" (1980: 320). It may have been that the "necessity of translating and producing a salable edition imposed restraint" on the translator (*ibid*.: 322).

A close analysis of the translation itself and a comparison with that of Pierre Coste is beyond the scope of this essay (see Baillon 2009). Here we will limit our discussion to a consideration of the framing of the text in the title and in the two prefaces, one by the editor and one by the translator himself.

The long title of the new translation is worth quoting in full:

> "*Optique de Newton. Traduction nouvelle, faites par M--- sur la dernière Édition originale, orné de vingt-une Planches, & approuvée par l'Académie Royale des Sciences; dédiée au Roi. Par M. Beauzèz, Éditeur de cet Ouvrage, l'un des Quarante de l'Académie Françoise, de l'Académie della Crusca; des Académies royales de Rouen, de Metz, & d'Arras; Professeur émérité de l'Ecole militaire, & Secrétaire-Interprète de Monseigneur Compte d'Artois.*" (Newton, *Optique*)

The author of the original evidently was in need of no introduction. The translator himself or herself, indicated as "M***", maintained the fiction of anonymity. This anonymity was only resolved in the *Memoires* of the Girondin revolutionary and associate of Marat, Jacques-Pierre Brissot (Conner 1998: 60), but there seems little doubt of the identity of the translator, given the public polemics between Marat and the Academy and his own well-known expertise in the area of Newtonian optics. Crucially, the translation had been "approuvée" by the French Royal Academy of Sciences, thus fulfilling one of the principal functions of the

[4] For Pierre Coste, see Rumbold (1991). For Coste's translation of Newton, see Hamou (2018) and for a comparison of Coste's and Marat's translation, see Baillon (2009).

translation, at least for the translator himself. Marat could finally boast of recognition in terms of scientific and linguistic competence by the Academy, and precisely in the area in which they had denied his competence, although for the Academy, of course, the recognition regarded the faithfulness of the translation, and not theories of the translator himself.

The title also indicated, as was customary, that the work was dedicated to the king, Louis XVI, later referred to in the dedication as the “plus grands des Rois” a wording which would no doubt have brought down the wrath of the later revolutionary Marat. The dedication, and indeed the subsequent preface, was written by Nicolas “Beauzèz”, evidently a variant spelling for the linguist, grammarian and academician Beauzée, one of the forty members of the Academy of Sciences and the one Marat, in Brissot’s account, had tricked into sponsoring the translation (Conner 1998: 60). As well as the various endorsements of Beauzée in terms of his membership of Academies, it is worth noting also that Beauzée is indicated as under the patronage of the Compte d’Artois, for whom Marat too worked, either as doctor or as veterinary surgeon to his stable (Conner 1998: 35).

The dedication was followed by a “Préface de l’éditeur” by Beauzée himself. First this established that vision was a source of innumerable scientific subjects and that now “à la tête des differents ouvrages publiés sur cette belle Science, on doit metter le *Traité de Newton sur les colours*” (*Optique*, ix), that is, the accepted French title of his *Opticks*. The praise for the original text continued; it was a “traité sublime” as the whole of learned Europe had recognized and had been translated into most languages. However, the editor’s preface went on, everybody complained of the “obscurité & de l’infidélité des traductions qui ont paru jusqu’ici” (*ibid.*). One should not be surprised at this as it would be necessary to find a translator “également au fait des Langues & de l’Optique” a mixture which “se rencontre trop rarement” (*ibid.*:). This was particularly the case, Beauzée said, with the French translation: not only was it unfaithful and obscure, it was “servile et barbare” (*ibid*.:ix-x). It was no surprise that these defects were to be found in the standard translation by Coste, as he was not a scientist. Indeed, for Beauzée, Coste was “étranger à la matière”, little versed in languages, and even less in the

art of writing.[5] These deficiencies in preparation had their effect on the translation: “il a servilment copié les tours de phrase de l’original, & conservé, avec une forte affectation, une multitudes de redites” (*ibid*.: x). The result was that “il a rendu, en termes toujours impropres & souvent inintelligibles, les sublimes idées de l’Auteur” (*ibid*).

This was Beauzée’s justification for the presentation of Marat’s translation. The legitimation of Marat’s translation followed the common strategy for new translations of “negative filiation” (Lefevere 1998: 47), in this case with respect to the standard translation by Coste. The attack on Coste, in fact, was followed by a eulogy of the new translation which could only have been carried out by “un Savant, également versé dans l’art d’écrire & familier avec les experiences de Newton” (*ibid*.: xi). In terms of the translation itself, Beauzée indicated three characteristics:

> Il a souvent rendu par un mot de longues périphrases; il a retranché une infinité de répétitions fastidiuses; … Il a jeté en notes plusieurs définitions & observations, qui, intercalées dans le texte sous la forme de parenthèses, rompoient la chaîne des raisonnements. (*ibid*.)

The translator had also added some explanations as well as a large number of illustrations (*planches*) and a subsequent note to show how the notion of “optics” had progressed since Newton. The overall result was that this branch of science would become “en même temps plus aisée à concevoir & a retenir” (*ibid*.: xii), and this independently of the sanction of the Académie. These modifications , Beauzée continued, had been made possible by the translator’s own particular competence in Newtonian science, and had a particular aim, that of spreading the ideas of Newton beyond the elite scientific community, and in particular to

[5] The attack on Coste was is tendentious: although Coste was not a scientist, the translation had been overseen and corrected by two highly qualified scientific figures, Abram De Moivre and Jean Theophilus Desaguliers, which appears to give the lie to any notion that the translation lacked scientific credibility (Rumbold 1991: 75; Baillon 2009: 2). In terms of his other competences, Coste had devoted most of his life to translation as well as writing regularly for literary reviews (Rumbold 1991). His translation of John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* had become the standard version in French of this important philosophical treatise (Hamou 2018).

young people in order that they could better understand “le plus sublimes ouvrage qui ait jamais paru sur les étonnants phénomènes de la lumière” (*ibid*.: xiv).

This editor’s preface was followed by another by the translator himself. It begins with what we may call the construction of the translating subject. Writing in the first person, the translator recounts how, wanting to “approfondir le Systême de Newton sur les colours” and not having an original to hand, began to study some translations of it “dont je tardai pas à sentir les défauts … des termes impropres, des redites éternelles; négligences toujours impardonable” as well as a “style lâche, diffus, incohérent” (*ibid*.: xv). It was this which had stimulated the translator to provide a new version. Indeed, the translation had begun “pour mon usage particulier” (*ibid*.: xvi) and had not been intended for publication. The decision to publish was only so that “jeunes gens qui courent la carrière des Sciences” (*ibid*.) could have access to Newton’s work.

The translator’s comments on method concern first the difference between French and English. The former is attached to “pureté & à l’élégance du style”, whereas the latter “s’attache plus particulièrement aux choses” (*ibid*.: xvii). To make an elegant translation into French, particularly of “ouvrages scientifiques” would be to understand little about “la différence des goûts nationaux” (*ibid*.). Thus Newton had written with a concern above all with fundamentals without stopping to worry about his choice of word and “l’ordre des idées” (*ibid*.). It is thus that a translation into French, in order to “devenir agréable” must be a “traduction libre” (*ibid*. xviii). Marat then repeats the indications in the editor’s preface with regard to the changes made, adding that he had also “transposé quelques passages” and had rewritten the “transitions naturelles” in many places where the particular forms of French would not allow passing from one topic to another “brusquement” (*ibid*.: xviii-xix). After bringing gold to the surface, however, said the preface, it must be refined, and the translator had thus attempted to produce a final version “en rendant les idées de l’Auteur avec toute clarté & la simplicité possible” (*ibid*.: xix). This work, Marat concludes, means that it is the first time that “le fameux *Traité des couleurs* paroît parmi nous en langage intelligible” (xix-xx).

3. Framing the translation: science and politics

We may make three observations with regard to this framing of the translation, on the part of both Beauzée and Marat himself. First, the entire translation project must clearly be understood within the context of Marat's attempts to gain recognition for his own theories of light and his attempt to criticize the orthodoxy of Newtonianism. The translation served, clearly, as a means of legitimating and promoting not only his linguistic skills but in particular his own scientific competence, and these were ironically set against the Academy's own unwillingness to recognize these competences in his own work. His scientific knowledge, it should be pointed out, was not revealed, as Brissot later put forward in his *Mémoires*, through exploiting the footnotes to put forward his own views (Conner 1998: 60). As Beauzée himself remarks, the notes were on the whole explanatory and did not contest the theories of the "sublime" Newton. Where they did anything more than explain, the notes had a different function altogether. Many referred with appreciation to the work of the experimentalist and physicist, Alex-Marie de Rochon. Abbé Rochon was a member of the commission which was to give the Academy's approval to the translation, and the notes quoting him, we may assume, were functional to obtaining this sanction. Rather than through intrusive notes, Marat's scientific competence emerged from the strategy of "negative filiation" with regard to the earlier translation by Coste in Beauzée's preface, as we have seen.

Second, the translation can be interpreted as part of a struggle, to be found in other eighteenth-century French contexts, between scientists and intellectuals on the "outside" and the Academies. A justification for the translation was the "obscurité" of the standard one, and any translation which offered a more comprehensible text, open to a younger generation of scientists was to be welcomed. This translation strategy is, metaphorically at least, also tied to the opening up of public scientific discourse, taking it out of the closed academies towards the nascent public opinion. Marat's ambivalent relation to the scientific and political establishment, seeking its favour and recognition at one moment and at the same time attacking it for its inability to accommodate innovatory figures such as himself who challenged prevailing orthodoxies, mirrors in some ways the

political discourse of the period. His response to his earlier rejection by the Academy, we may remember, was to invoke a concept which was radically innovatory in public discourse: an appeal to public opinion, the “enlightened and impartial public” (cit. in Gillispie 1980: 307). The notion of a national public opinion was to condition the convoking of the Estates General and lead, in 1789 to the constitution of a National Assembly and the acceleration of the revolutionary process (Baker 1990: 167-199).

Third, and related to this political context, it is surely significant that the particular “negative filiation” of the editor’s introduction accuses Coste’s translation of being “servile” and following “servilment” the English original. On the one hand, this is an example of the standard “translator as servant” metaphor (Simeoni 1998: 7-8) which has consistently downgraded the importance of the translator. On the other, it seems a particularly resonant criticism in this particular pre-revolutionary context.

We may make a final comment on Marat’s preface which relates to general concerns on translation history rather than the specific context of this translation. Marat’s translation strategy, in his own account, was linked to the differences in taste between the two languages and cultures, one (the French) “purer” and more “elegant”; the other (English) more concerned with “things”. Leaving aside the vexed question of the fit between a particular linguistic form and national characteristics, we may not that Marat is here writing within a traditional characterisation and stereotyping of the two cultures which is instantly recognizable. Marat’s preface is also an example of how translation can function to reinforce the ways in which these linguistic and cultural systems can be conceived of as discrete entities. It has been argued, in fact, that translation in this period particularly had precisely this function of celebrating and reinforcing national languages (Venuti 1998: 667-681). Marat’s own “free” translation, in this framework, would be conceived of as one of “domestication” (Venuti 1995: 19-20) in that, at least in his declarations in the preface, he was oriented to moving away from the forms and structures of the original (which Pierre Coste had followed in too “servile” a manner) to produce a text coherent with the norms and structures of the target language.

To return to Marat's own investment of energy in a translation, we have an example of a translation whose principal characteristic and *raison d'être* emerges as strongly tied to the ambitions and motivations of the translator. The two prefaces make clear that the translation is a strong attempt to break into the scientific establishment. As in the case of *The Chains of Slavery*, a radical text published in a lavish copy for a wealthy readership, Marat's chief readership for his translation, although he nods in the direction of new young readers, would appear to be the scientific establishment itself. Marat's fellow revolutionary a few years later, Jacques- Pierre Brissot, thought that with his translation, with its iconoclastic attack on the standard Coste translation, had "courageously overthrown the idol of academic worship" (cit. in Conner 1998: 54). Marat's translation, in other words, is to be understood as a variant of the old story of a young (or relatively young), talented professional attempting, unsuccessfully, to break through the "barriers to entry" of *ancien régime* society, a struggle which was a standard trope of the late eighteenth-century from Diderot to Beaumarchais.

Despite Marat's struggles, and despite the support he had from at least one academician, Beauzée, he was never admitted to the scientific establishment. His *Mémoires académiques* (1788) published the following year, according to Gillispie, is angry and confused. It consists of four memoirs submitted to other Academies, in Lyon and other cities, all denouncing the errors of Newtonian theories of light, some dating from before his translation (Gillispie 322-328).[6] In this perspective, Marat's translation of Newton's *Optics* was a last effort at qualifying for admission to the scientific establishment. After this attempt, and outside the fold, Marat the revolutionary journalist published a well-known denunciation of the institution of the Academy, *Les charlatans modern ou lettres sur le charlatanisme académique* (1791). His energetic struggle for recognition by the establishment, which had constituted the context and motivation for his

[6] Gillispie is of the opinion that it is not clear whether Marat was really the author of these memoirs (1980: 322).

translation, gave way to an iconoclastic struggle against this establishment, both scientific and political.

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