This class will be dedicated to some consideration of one of our principal course books:


We spent much of last week considering the epigraphs to the chapters of my book and to continue in this vein, here is the epigraph from Wright’s introduction to her book:

> In order to bring in their babies’ bread most translators must have an academic connection and must toil in those insidious groves where translation, along with the rest of literature, has fallen into the hands of the big kids, who like to take things apart to see how they work. I remember the big kids as the spoilers, always ruining what the more imaginative little kids were up to.  
>  
> Gregory Rabassa, *If This Be Treason* (2005:42)


This epigraph draws our attention to the existence of Translation Studies as a discipline (an “interdiscipline” as I have called it) and also to the fact that many translators (and some academics outside the Translation Studies field) remain diffident regarding its value. This is the main thrust of Wright’s introduction, together with a focus on the balance between theory and practice:

> MA programmes will typically offer a core module on translation theory and a ‘hands-on’ translation workshop in which participants critique the translations of their fellow students, or some variation of this pedagogical constellation. This separation means that the nature of the relationship between theory and practice is often unclear and might in part be responsible for the commonly held but erroneous view that theory is something to be ‘applied’, the way one applies a can opener to a tin of baked beans or implements a new skincare regime. (Wright 4)

Theory is not, and never can be, some sort of magic recipe for the practice of translation. It is, at most, a device for increasing awareness of what goes on in the process. Awareness is the key to successful translation, just as it is the key to all successful communication.

Chapter 1
Why do we translate?

Translations do not happen easily, anywhere or anytime. It is rarely a question of someone simply wanting to translate. Every translation ensues from a context where someone finds themselves in the presence of a series of necessary elements: something to translate, a social reason to do so, ideas about the nature of translation, and the necessary time, space, money, and intellectual skills. Together all of that can produce a translation.
Anthony Pym, On Translator Ethics (2012:100)

Literature must have been translated for enhancing one group’s cultural heritage at the expense of another’s. Perhaps a kind of imperialism where the ‘text’ supported or solidified a territorial or lineal claim. Or perhaps a benign looting to bolster what was felt to be an inferior native patrimony. Or, less benignly, literature could have been translated as a pleasure commodity with a price; life in the case of Scheherazade, but minstrels, story-tellers must have been human trophies all along. [...] All in all, millennia later, the motives for translating literature may not be all that different.

Marilyn Gaddis Rose, Translation and Literary Criticism (1997:15–16) (Wright 13)

The two epigraphs from Chapter 1, by far the longest chapter, give us some important clues to Wright’s focus in this part of her book.

In the first chapter, I will consider the issue of the ethics of translation by asking why we translate. It is possible to answer this question synchronically and diachronically, for our own time and place and for earlier epochs and traditions. I am primarily concerned with answering it for a contemporary setting, and my focus will be on the English-speaking world, broadly defined (mainly the UK, the US and Canada), in full awareness of the fact that this transnational entity has separate national and subnational faces and concerns. I have adopted this transnational focus because English-language publishing is a transnational industry – literary translators produce work across national borders – and because academia in the English-speaking world is very much in cross-border dialogue, a fact reflected in the business of academic publishing. (Wright 5-6)

In this description of Chapter 1 in her introduction, Wright then proceeds to apologise for not dealing with other areas of the Anglophone world, justifying these omissions quite reasonably by pointing out that she herself has no personal experience of living or working within them. The Anglophone world is indeed an enormous entity, impossible to know in its entirety.

Wright provides a “personal response” to the question in the chapter’s title and explains that while she does not rely on translation to make her living, she does “pitch and catch”, i.e. she proposes translations to publishers and accepts commissioned translations from publishers.

The various sections of this chapter, each preceded by its own epigraph: Why do I translate? A personal response / Why do we translate? The humanist response / Why do we translate? Ideological agendas / Why do we translate? Translation as a mode of reading and writing / Coda: Babel

The humanist response is deeply rooted in the ideal of international communication, similar to the biblically inspired “nation shall speak peace unto nation” motto of the BBC.
The ideological agendas are the many ways in which receiving cultures will shape the source culture to suit their own mindsets and world views. Venuti’s “domestication” and “foreignization” receive a lot of attention here.

Looking at translation as a mode of reading and writing is essential to understanding what translation is. There is no more thorough and intense form of reading, for it is the attempt to be all readers. Similarly, the translator as writer has to capable of providing the nearest thing possible to a recreation of the original text. “Documentary” and “instrumental” translation – developed from a theory by Christiane Nord – indicates the fact that translation work on the one hand “documents” the original, “reproduces” it, but on the other hand it is also “instrumental” in terms of the effect it has on its readers.

The coda to this long chapter, “Babel”, illustrates what Wright describes as the “ur-response” to the question of why we translate: a necessary and never futile task no matter how hard it may seem.