



# alta

AMERICAN LITERARY  
TRANSLATORS ASSOCIATION

A HISTORY  
1978-2014



Rainer Schulte

Published by The University of Texas at Dallas  
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21 22 23 24 25 26 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN-13: 978-1-7923-7084-7

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ANSI Z39.48 1992.

Cover design by Alan McCuller  
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# Preface

by **Rainer Schulte**

## **Translation Fever at The University of Texas at Dallas in 1978**

There are moments in history when certain events unexpectedly embrace each other. The Center for Translation Studies was founded at The University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) in 1978, the same year that the first conference of the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) took place, on November 10, at UTD. Both of these ventures would not have flourished had it not been for the administrative support of Dr. Alexander Clark, the Vice President of Academic Affairs. UTD had been in existence for only a few years, and Dr. Clark considered the study of translation a major innovative branch of the university. He introduced the first meeting of ALTA and confirmed the commitment of his administration to ALTA. For years, Dr. Clark generously supported the association with funds from the university. This contributed greatly to the growth and the success of the organization.

The title of the first conference, “The Role of Translation in the Humanities,” set the tone for the future landscape of ALTA’s vision. In many cases, the academic world, and especially modern language departments, gave no support to instructors who worked in the area of translation studies. Professors who had distinguished themselves with publications of their translations of foreign authors and their scholarly works on the theory of translation would frequently not list their accomplishments when they were being considered for promotion. ALTA was conceived as a major power to give translation studies a place in the academic world and inform the general public that communication with other cultures and languages happens through the act of translation.

ALTA, with its 305 charter members, began to change the image of the translator in the United States. The first conference saw a dialogue between well-known translators and writers in a comfortable social and professional atmosphere. From the very beginning, ALTA also maintained a healthy and fruitful dialogue between professional translators and the incoming generation of younger translators.

It was also at that time that the publication of *Translation Review* was started. The review provided a platform for translators to voice their interpretive perspectives on the art and craft of translation. All members of ALTA receive a free copy of *Translation Review*. The lectures, presentations, and workshops at the conferences transmitted a feeling of excitement to the participating members of ALTA. A sense of a new era in the world of translation was being felt.

Every year the horizon of ALTA's goals and activities widened. "Bilingual readings" of poetry from many languages enchanted the conference participants. Panels, presentations, and workshops illuminated the practice and theory of translation studies and contributed to establishing a different atmosphere in the academic world with respect to the study and importance of translation. An atmosphere of relief and excitement infused the lectures, presentations, and workshops. A new era for translators and international authors was in the making. Eminent writers and translators came to ALTA conferences and gladly engaged in dialogue with new and young translators.

The brains behind the founding of ALTA saw a different world: translators as the creators of meaningful dialogue between nations; translators as the most qualified experts to open the voyage of literary and humanistic works across the bridge from one culture and language to another. The practice of translation was seen as an innovative power to revitalize the reading and interpretation of literary and humanistic works, to foster interdisciplinary studies between the humanities and the sciences, and to renovate the methods of research and scholarship, especially at the threshold of the digital age.

# Perspectives on the History of ALTA

by **Thomas Hoeksema**

In October 1978, the first conference of ALTA was held at the UTD. Seventy-eight translators registered for the conference, including some of the most prominent in the profession. There was an air of expectant energy, but also many questions about how the organization would be structured, financed, and governed. Prior to the founding of ALTA, translators worked in isolation as independent agents. Translators had no centralized way to communicate with fellow translators.

Publishers selected individuals to carry out translation projects, and the results were frequently reviewed by people who were less than fluent in the original languages. Translators were not paid well, and publishers did not see translated publications as profitable. As a result, American readers had access to a short list of international poets and writers. There was a clear need for an organization like ALTA.

UTD's unique interdisciplinary mission was an ideal academic environment for ALTA. Translation brings together many disciplines and avenues for research—literature, languages, humanities, and cultural studies. UTD had the resources and the institutional flexibility to promote an organization like ALTA. The success of ALTA was a result of the generosity of the university, the vision of key administrators, and the commitment to make the planning and oversight of ALTA a major part of a translation-based curriculum.

Prior to the 1960s, there was a general consensus that translations of literary works, whether classics or texts from any movement, century, or language, were finished products. If a translation was held in high regard, it could even be considered the definitive rendering. There

was little incentive or encouragement for translators to retranslate a work. The translation of a literary work was typically not subjected to serious critical examination. Since a majority of readers could not judge the accuracy or quality of the translation, they had no choice but to assume that the translator had done a responsible job, and the publisher had properly vetted the translator.

Attitudes toward translation changed during the 1960s as literature became more of a globally shared experience. A resurgence of innovation across languages and continents fostered a new generation of translators who introduced a full range of international writing into English. The “boom” in Latin America, the nouveau roman in France, the genre-bending work of Samuel Beckett, as well as poetry and prose by younger writers, changed the literary landscape, and the translators of these new texts were now in the spotlight. Translators of both new and established writers from a wide range of languages—including Gregory Rabassa, William Weaver, Margaret Sayers Peden, Ben Belitt, Kimon Friar, John Nims, and Herman Salinger—were now being given prominent billing and critical praise for the quality of their work.

In 1967, the first issue of *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts*, edited by Rainer Schulte, was published. It was the first journal to introduce an international range of poets and writers in bilingual format. Other journals with bilingual formats, including *Hispanic Arts/Artes Hispanicas*, soon followed. The *en face* presentation of the poetry was the outstanding feature of *Mundus Artium*. The work of the translators was on full display side-by-side with the original text. In a *New York Times* review of *Mundus Artium*, the eminent critic Wallace Fowlie said that *Mundus Artium* is “making a notable contribution to the revival of literary translation in this country...and *Mundus Artium* provides a richness of poetry translation that is unequalled in the number of countries and tongues represented” (*The New York Times*, December 9, 1973). Many of the poems in MA were commissioned by the editors, necessitating a personal visit to Vicente Aleixandre in Spain several years before his Nobel Prize-winning recognition. A section of one of the 1970 issues was devoted to Aleixandre’s poetry, including the introductory poem, “Para quien escribo” (“For Whom I Write”), which was composed for that



special issue.

By presenting poetry in bilingual format, *MA* was implicitly addressing all the questions that the art and craft of translation inevitably raise. *Mundus Artium* showed the literary translator as a mediator between two languages and cultures. By featuring the translator, *Mundus Artium* elevated the translator within the literary and scholarly community.

Prior to *Mundus Artium* and *ALTA*, there were several distinguished poets and translators who initiated a spirited discussion about literary translation. With little or no knowledge of the source languages, Ezra Pound revolutionized poetic translation in the early twentieth century. Pound was a prolific translator of works from Japanese, Chinese, Hindi, and several other languages. It was his intention to translate those writers whose work marked important new developments in world literature. The translations were “free,” and were often criticized for technical errors, but it was Pound who promoted the idea that literary works from all languages, countries, and centuries needed to be somehow shared broadly with readers. It was Pound who initiated the serious discussion of translation as a re-creative art form.

Robert Lowell’s *Imitations* (1961) was a landmark publication that expanded the discussion of literary translation. Lowell took his title from Ovid and the three-part distinction between metaphrase (word-for-word), paraphrase (some liberties), and imitation (general hints from the original). Lowell’s experiment provoked widespread discussion and controversy about what constituted a faithful or accurate translation. He challenged conventional thinking about the translator’s obligation to an original text. Lowell’s “*Imitations*” ranged from Homer to the Symbolists to modern writers such as Rilke and Montale. He expanded on Pound’s notion of translator-as-collaborator, since Lowell was not fluent in most of the languages he chose to imitate.

Before he was successful as a writer, Samuel Beckett was a prolific translator. As far back as 1930, he was publishing English translations of the surrealist poets in literary journals. In 1952, Beckett translated *Waiting for Godot* into English, and from that point forward, he self-translated almost all his novels, plays, and prose pieces into English and several other

languages. Beckett was undoubtedly the premier bilingual writer of the twentieth century.

Robert Bly continued the tradition of collaborative translation. In 1972 he published *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations Chosen by Robert Bly*. Bly worked with individuals who were knowledgeable in the poets' native languages and rendered the work of dozens of poets from Swedish, Persian, Norwegian, Spanish, French, Arabic, Japanese, and more. Bly's work, like that of Lowell and Pound, was controversial and widely criticized because all three of them were reliant on informants to access the original texts. Despite this, Pound, Lowell, and Bly did a great service to the profession of literary translator. One could disagree with their methodology or the final rendering of the poem, but as a result of their work, translation became a major focus of discussion. The theory, art, and craft of translation came to be seen as critical elements of textual interpretation. The focus on translation opened new ways of examining the creative process and served as a window into intercultural communication.

With the founding of the American Literary Translators Association in 1978, translators finally had an organization where they could meet and share the unique challenges of their demanding profession. At the time, ALTA was a revolutionary organization in the way it brought the best practitioners in the field of literary translation together and helped establish the highest standards for translated work. Through the efforts of ALTA, literary translation came to be recognized as a vital profession and a major contributor to intercultural and international communication.

# Introduction

The history of ALTA covers the years from 1978 to 2014. During that period, ALTA was headquartered at UTD. The organization was co-founded by Rainer Schulte and A. Leslie Willson. Under the presidency of Miller Williams, it was decided that the permanent office of ALTA was to be at UTD. From the very beginning, the upper administration of UTD was in full support of the organization, and Dr. Alexander Clark, the then Vice President for Academic Affairs, provided regular financial support for ALTA, which had an office located in the Center for Translation Studies. The Center for Translation Studies and ALTA were both under the directorship of Rainer Schulte.

Professor Schulte was invited to come to UTD in 1975 from Ohio University, where he had built the program in comparative literature and translation. The attraction to come to UTD was the reality that this new university had officially been created in 1969, and only in 1975 were the first graduate students and upper undergraduate students enrolled. The founders of the university envisioned a new landscape for the study of the humanities and the sciences. Since Schulte had been educated in Germany and had received his PhD at the University of Michigan, he saw this new university as an interdisciplinary melding of the humanities and the sciences. (Geisteswissenschaften and Naturwissenschaften).

Schulte brought with him from Ohio University the journal *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts*. The journal was heavily supported by the Mellon Foundation and continued to be published until 1985 at UTD, when financial support from the Mellon Foundation came to an abrupt end. *Mundus Artium* consistently highlighted very contemporary international authors with several special issues on Latin American poetry and fiction, Chinese literature, women's literature, and Arabic literature, to name only a few. The

journal also paid attention to contemporary composers, dancers, and artists. That background motivated Schulte to think about the presence of translators in the United States. Many academic institutions were not very favorably inclined toward the idea of translation being an essential part of literature programs. Many writers had been translated but thinking about the art and craft of translation was not at the forefront of theoretical concerns in the academic world. *Translation Review* was established to respond to that need. The position of the translator in the academic world, however, was quite questionable. Many of the younger translators in literature programs were hiding their activities in the realm of translation, since it was often interpreted as a negative influence for promotion.

The time for an organization was ripe. In the summer of 1977, Schulte was conducting a translation workshop at the University of Texas in Austin at the invitation of Professor A. Leslie Willson, the Chair of Germanic Languages. Serious discussions about the situation of the translator in the cultural and academic environment were conducted, which led to the creation of ALTA.

The beginning of ALTA coincided with the creation of *Translation Review*, which also became a forum for ALTA members to reflect their ideas on the practice and theory of translation. From the very beginning, *Translation Review* was conceived as a forum for cultivating a dialogue among American and international authors, translators, and scholars covering the art and craft of literary translation. Over the years, *Translation Review* has brought recognition that the translator is one of the most important agents in promoting understanding and appreciation among nations.

The practice of translation and its theoretical dimensions became an anchor point at UTD for strengthening the presence of translation thinking as a foundation of literary and humanistic studies. Translation projects cover several landscapes: the actual translation of literary and humanistic works, the theoretical implications for the interpretation of texts, and the application of translation methodologies to introduce and enhance the practice of interdisciplinarity. The nature of translation is to establish dialogues between the various branches of the humanities and

the sciences. That was actually the vision when the founders of UTD established a new university model to respond to the needs of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These were the concepts that led to the creation of the Center for Translation Studies at UTD.

# Dr. Alexander Clark

The start of the Translation Center and the subsequent founding of ALTA would not have happened without the outstanding support of Dr. Alexander Clark, Vice President of Academic Affairs. Dr. Clark strongly supported the vision of this new university to create and implement an interdisciplinary program in the arts and humanities. I developed a working relationship with Dr. Clark, and on several occasions, I mentioned to him that we needed funds for ALTA. He would always ask how much. I generally responded with a figure, in most cases \$5,000. He would then tell me to see his able administrative assistant Charlotte Bowling, and the rest was history. Dr. Clark provided the necessary office spaces for both the Center and ALTA. In addition, he allocated a yearly budget for the Center and always provided additional funds for the daily operation of the ALTA office whenever needed. Dr. Clark can be credited with having had a major influence on the study of translation at UTD, but also on showcasing the importance of translation for humanistic studies. Without him, neither the Translation Center nor ALTA would have become a reality within the School of Arts & Humanities.

Professors Thomas Hoeksema and Dennis Kratz have been two major anchor points for the flourishing and success of ALTA. Both became presidents of the organization and were instrumental in shaping the conceptual framework of ALTA in 1978.

# The Growth of ALTA

by Thomas Hoeksema

I was associated with ALTA for 37 years, as a charter member in 1978, vice-president and president of the organization (1988–92), and as an ongoing consultant to Rainer Schulte (co-founder of ALTA) and UTD School of Arts and Humanities, which provided space, clerical support, financial resources, and leadership to ALTA until 2015. I had an active role working with Rainer and ALTA, which gave me a comprehensive and unique perspective on the organization's founding and development.

Translation became central to the UTD School of Arts and Humanities curriculum in the mid-1970s. The idea for an organization that could represent the interests and needs of literary translators grew out of Professor Schulte's professional emphasis on translation, and the UTD institutional emphasis on academic and creative coursework focused on translation theory, art, and practice.

Prior to 1978 and the founding of ALTA, the work of literary translators was underappreciated and misunderstood. Translators were poorly compensated for their work. Translators worked in isolation as free agents without informed acknowledgment of their work, and without any centralized way to communicate with fellow translators.

ALTA was a transformative organization in the way it brought together the best minds in the field of translation. Through the *ALTA Newsletter* (and later the website), the annual ALTA Conference, and *Translation Review* (edited and founded by Rainer Schulte also in 1978), translators were able to interact with each other for the first time and expand the dialogue on translation. ALTA helped establish literary translation as a skilled profession.

It took several years to determine how ALTA and *Translation Review* could best provide service to members and represent their interests. The *Newsletter* became a vital clearinghouse of information for translators. The annual conference brought translators together and provided an invaluable forum for discussion of issues of mutual interest. *Translation Review* provided the only publishing outlet devoted exclusively to translation issues. Professor Schulte and the support staff at the UTD Center for Translation Studies responded to a wide range of member questions and suggestions that facilitated communication between ALTA members.

It is noteworthy that early on, ALTA recognized the professional needs of both independent and academic translators. Independent translators had very pragmatic interests in obtaining rights and permissions, networking with publishers, and receiving fair remuneration for their efforts. Academic translators were often teaching translation, publishing translations and translation criticism in journals, and using their accomplishments as a basis for tenure and promotion. ALTA had to make both groups feel welcome, and ALTA leaders had to design conference panels and invite speakers that would reflect the range of concerns. It is a signal success of ALTA that both groups of translators maintained active memberships and learned from each other.

From its earliest years, ALTA was recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as an important and unique organization worthy of support. ALTA was fortunate that several NEA Directors understood the significance of supporting the work of translators as agents of cultural transmission on a national as well as international scale. NEA grant proposals were developed by the ALTA staff and refined in discussions with NEA Directors. This grant funding contributed significantly to ALTA's success over the decades, and NEA recognition elevated the cultural status of ALTA in the broader literary world.

In addition to publishing reviews of translated texts, *TR* has featured translation essays and scholarship that had no other publishing outlet. With 40 years of publication, *TR* has provided models of how translation scholarship can address the unique features of translation theory, art, and craft. In addition, *TR* has published numerous interviews with translators that have



enabled readers to gain detailed insight into translators' methodologies—what Ralph Mannheim called “the translator’s kitchen.” Over the years, the Annotated Books Received (ABR) section of *Translation Review* summarized the contents of hundreds of translated texts. This inclusive feature of *Translation Review* made ALTA members and other subscribers aware of the range of genres and extensive catalogue of languages being translated into English.

In 2001, an ad hoc committee met in Dallas to establish the ALTA Endowment, and I gave a presentation that outlined how ALTA’s status as a 401-c-3 organization could be used to raise funds that would provide a permanent source of support for the organization. As of 2018, the Endowment had raised and earned more than \$500,000 and, more importantly, the principal has never been used to meet ALTA’s financial needs. An Investment Committee was also formed under the very able leadership of Paul Daw. This committee reports to the ALTA Board and makes recommendations about investment strategy. ALTA’s future is more secure because of the Endowment.

The annual book exhibit at the ALTA Conference highlighted translators’ published works and facilitated networking between translators working in the same language, and between translators and publishers. The book exhibit also enabled publishers to present their translated texts, discuss future collaborations with translators, and to see firsthand how energized the field of literary translation was becoming. In addition, the book exhibit also gave members an opportunity to display their translation publications. Many productive discussions and partnerships occurred in the book exhibit context.

The organization is to be commended for supporting Fellowships for Young Translators. These fellowships were funded by member donations. Through the fellowships, new members were recruited, and young translators were able to establish mentor relationships with more experienced translators.

Panel members were strongly encouraged to avoid the reading of papers. It was difficult for some to break with the usual format of professional conferences, but the more dynamic

panels at ALTA conferences occurred when members were more spontaneous and open to audience questions and responses.

Keynote speakers at ALTA conferences filled an important role. They were always experienced, widely published translators who had been in the profession for decades.

Listening to Gregory Rabassa, Petch Peden, Richard Howard, and Robert Fagles, among others, was an opportunity for members to learn from the most successful and influential voices of the profession.

The social atmosphere at ALTA conferences needs to be noted. There was a genuine sense of excitement at the conferences as friendships were renewed and new relationships established. There was a sense of an ALTA family. This happened, I think, because there was such a common ground for discussion and interaction between members. Individuals may be working in very different languages, but the challenges and rewards of the translation process were shared experiences. And, since translating can be a lonely and not always fully appreciated activity, the ALTA members knew right away at the conference that they were among colleagues, fellow travelers in the mysterious and deeply satisfying creative world of translation.

# The ALTA Mission: A Brief History

by Dennis Kratz

Mission statements, like legal decisions and translations, invite interpretation, revision, and, on occasion, replacement. Considered as a formal contract defining basic values and goals, a Mission establishes not only the focus but also the boundaries of an organization's activities. It distinguishes legitimate from marginal and irrelevant concerns. Considered as the translation of an ideal into practice, a Mission can function more like a work of art by expanding our understanding and implying that all boundaries are permeable. While musical notation or words of a text remain fixed, their implications for interpretation or performance inevitably evolve with the passage of time. The meaning of a Mission Statement, like that of a legal document or a poem, depends on both the words of the text and the talent of the interpreter.

ALTA began not with a formal Mission Statement but with an idea—to enhance the quality and recognition of literary translation—expressed in a series of interrelated goals:

- To create a professional forum for the exchange of ideas on the translator's art
- To increase the public awareness of the important cultural role played by literary translators
- To expand literary translation activities in the United States
- To intensify the international literary and cultural exchange
- To foster the efforts of young translators

The idea had two inextricably entwined aspects: first, to support literary translators and translation as a profession; second, to create a *community* in which translators could share

ideas and hone their artistic craft. The language expressing this idea was relentlessly active. A sequence of strong verbs established an optimistic tone: support, exchange, create, increase, expand, intensify, and foster. While the proposal emphasized literary translation, it also signaled a desire to expand the concept of translation by referring to the translator's "art" and twice calling attention to the "cultural" dimension of translation. The emphasis on the organization as a forum for the exchange of ideas raises the possibility not only of thinking about but also of re-thinking what translators do and how the profession benefits society. Finally, the absence of any restrictive language—that is, what is not included in the realm of translation—would prove important for the future of ALTA.

The theme of the inaugural ALTA conference—The Role of Translation in the Humanities—reinforced the implication that the educational role of literary translation extended beyond the literature classroom. The first plenary lecture delivered at the opening session addressed the subject "The Role of Translation in an Interdisciplinary Humanities Program." It is reasonable to say that from the first day of its formal existence, there coexisted parallel visions of ALTA's mission: one emerging from a view of translation within the bounds of literary expression, and the other from a view of translation as communication across any boundary of culture and symbolic representation—including academic disciplines, artistic forms, and communicative media. This latter view flourished at UTD, where Rainer Schulte led the design, application, and implementation of a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1984–86) titled "Translation as a Model for Revitalizing the Humanities."

Within ALTA, the focus remained on literary texts, although the larger perspective continued to leaven the annual conferences and liven issues of *Translation Review*. The thirtieth-anniversary conference, hosted by UTD, provided an opportunity both "to celebrate ALTA's achievement [that it] has fulfilled the mission in significant ways" and to enlarge that mission. The organization was challenged to "re-imagine the role of translation and the translator...[and] extend the role of literary translation in creative ways." The conference featured innovative

applications of translation theory and practice to music, theater, the visual arts, and other forms of cultural expression. The prevailing interpretation of ALTA's mission, however, did not change.

ALTA has flourished in many respects—increased membership, the rising reputation of literary translation, the creation of the ALTA Translation Awards, and increased—if not universal—acceptance by universities. The view of its Mission, however, has not grown; if anything, it has retreated from the expansive vision expressed at its founding. The ALTA website displays the following statement:

The mission of the American Literary Translators Association is to support the work of literary translators, advance the art of literary translation, and serve translators, and the students, teachers, publishers, and readers of literature in translation.

This mission represents a retreat from the larger perspective with which ALTA began. There are two troubling absences. The statement has deleted the original goal of creating a community or a forum for exchanging ideas. What remains is an itemized list of services to specific clients restricted to translators of *literary* texts intended for students, teachers, publishers, and *readers* of literature in translation. Absent also, then, is the larger world of the Humanities and any mention of music, dance, or the visual arts. This is a regrettable shrinkage of ambition that will inhibit ALTA from reaching its full potential. Since missions, like translations, invite revision and even replacement, there remains the capacity for a rethinking of the current statement to recover the spirit of optimism and adventure with which ALTA began.

# The Presidents of ALTA

ALTA was hosted by the School of Arts and Humanities at UTD from 1978 to 2014.

Statements by the ALTA presidents follow this list.

1978 A. Leslie Willson (Deceased)

1979 Miller Williams (Deceased)

1981 Richard Bjornson (Deceased)

1983 John Biguenet

1985 Breon Mitchell

1987 Dennis Kratz

1989 Thomas Hoeksema

1991 Lee Fahnstock

1993 Fred Fornoff (Deceased)

1995 John Balaban

1997 Lynn Hoggard

1999 John Biguenet

2001 Marian Schwartz

2003 David Ball

2005 John Balcom

2007 Jim Kates

2009 Barbara Harshav

2011 Gregory J. Racz

2013 Russell Valentino

# Statements by Former Presidents

## Toward a History of ALTA

**John Biguenet**

*1984–1986 and 1999–2001*

I look back over the first forty years of ALTA with a great deal of respect for what we have accomplished. Members of our organization have made substantial contributions to the establishment of translation studies as a significant field of academic inquiry. ALTA has improved the status of translators in the publishing world and lobbied successfully on behalf of the support of literary translation by funding agencies. We have battled for the acceptance of literary translation as a substantial scholarly activity in promotion and tenure reviews. We have produced four decades of publications such as, most notably, *Translation Review*, as well as our newsletters, series of guides, and website. We have held forty annual conferences, in which the sense of community created in the very first meeting in Dallas in 1978 has been nurtured and extended to new generations of translators. In short, we did what we set out to do forty years ago: to create a permanent organization to represent the interests of literary translators and to provide a forum in which the art and the craft of translation might enjoy sustained debate.

It is not enough merely to regret that publishers cannot find a market for works in translation, that academic programs in literary studies and creative writing are often indifferent to the literatures of other cultures. We translators have an obligation as citizens, and the future of our nation depends, in part, on our success in bringing to our fellow Americans what we alone can

provide: the translation of the foreign. However, we must do so not by disguising that Other as one of us but by expanding our perception of what we are in such a way as to include what has been, to us, foreign.

## **Breon Mitchell**

*1985*

ALTA offers its members something of profound value: the human contact and sense of belonging that lifts each of us from his or her sometimes lonely daily struggle with words and binds us together. Our annual meetings are central to our mission: they focus on the practice of literary translation, and on the celebration of literature and literary translation through performance and readings. They inspire us, invigorate us, make us want to do more, and to do it better. And they remind us that we are not alone. In a world in which translators have for so long been invisible, ALTA allows us to see each other as human beings, to remind us what those words we put on paper, put in space, are all about.

ALTA takes an active role in the training and support of our younger colleagues and in ongoing efforts to open the eyes of the academy to the importance of literary translation to world culture as a whole. ALTA also supports the preservation of archival material relating to literary translation for future generations of students and scholars. Before ALTA, there was little discussion of the important intercultural role of translators, and almost nothing was being done to record and recognize that role in literary history. ALTA has helped change all that—and in the years to come I trust and expect that ALTA will continue to serve as a conduit for the preservation of this unique material.



## **Dennis Kratz**

*1987*

ALTA and the Center for Translation Studies are inseparable for me. If pressed to specify a specific contribution, I take pride in having proposed in 1997 that ALTA establish an annual Translation Award (at the suggestion, after several glasses of wine, of a renowned translator). The National Translation Award, initiated in 2007, has now grown to four prestigious awards. I am more comfortable acknowledging the contribution of three of ALTA's founding members to my intellectual and professional enrichment. Thanks to Rainer Schulte's mentoring I gained skills and an interdisciplinary perspective that led to two administrative appointments. As Dean of Undergraduate Education (1994–96), inspiration and advice from Thomas Hoeksema enabled me to create UTD's first undergraduate Honors program. As Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities, intense conversations with John Biguenet helped me imagine a translation-based model of education from which arose a program where the creative arts and humanities converge with engineering and advanced technology. The Translation Center, you see, transcended Translation to transform the university. Here is for me the great gift of ALTA's founders: a community with inexhaustible good will and intellectual imagination.

## **John Balaban**

*1995*

While I was president, I tried to bring in conference keynote speakers who were translators with literary fame, like the poet W.S. Merwin. I also tried to connect ALTA to the wider literary world by bringing ALTA into presentations at the annual meetings of the Associated Writing Programs.

I have written thirteen books of poetry and prose and am a translator of Vietnamese poetry. In 1999, with two Vietnamese friends, I founded the Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation.

## Lynn Hoggard

*1997*

I had been nominated once before to be ALTA's president by founder Rainer Schulte but wasn't elected. The next election cycle he nominated me again; I ran unopposed and served from 1997 to 1999. Rainer had been a longtime friend both to me and my husband Jim. We visited regularly at conferences and gatherings in North Texas and all three of us were passionate about poetry and translation. (Rainer had done graduate studies at the University of Michigan when I was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow there in 1966–67, but I didn't know him then.)

I was given a tremendous opportunity to serve and to lead a pioneering group of literary translators, the first and only such independent group in America at the time. As its visionary founder and leader, Rainer Schulte wanted to foster a group of knowledgeable and talented people who would structure their meetings with the kind of imagination and sense of exploration that can lead to authentic, transformative learning, an atmosphere that philosopher Friederich Nietzsche called "gentle anarchy," and indeed it was. One of the things that Jim and I had most admired in the early ALTA conferences we attended, in addition to the excellence of the translation insights, was the absence of snideness and back-biting that marked other organizations we had known. Instead, these lively and talented people were more interested in telling us about other writers than in talking about themselves. Year after year we'd come back to our university (Midwestern State in Wichita Falls, TX) filled with enthusiasm and ideas for our own translation work and for ways of structuring our curriculum to include more emphasis on the craft of translation.

But how to lead this bounding herd of brainy felines who wandered through every country and language on earth, across every time period, through every literary genre? Fortunately, there were a lot of strong leaders, both pragmatic and far-seeing, who had laid the foundation,

including Tom Hoeksema, John Biguenet, Breon Mitchell, Dennis Kratz, Alexis Levitin, Marian Schwartz, Ellen Watson, Carol Maier, and dozens of others. My friend Eileen Tollett, who served as Executive Director of ALTA at UTD, helped make our plans come true in conference after conference. When ALTA met in Guadalajara, Mexico, in an effort to promote dialogue on literary translation in North America, Eileen and I flew there to arrange logistics. The 1998 conference was not large, but, in combination with a meeting of the International Federation of Translators, it was one of our liveliest and most cross-culturally fertile gatherings.

I wanted to accomplish several things as president of ALTA. First among them was to maintain the quality of the conferences with their twin emphases on craft and skill in translation.

Already terrific, our conferences needed to stay that way, and I think they did, less because of my work than because of ALTA members themselves, who came up with workshops, readings, and discussions that were timely, important, useful, and, often, incredibly fun. We also tried to devote efforts to facilitate contacts and social interactions among translators and between translators and publishers. We brought in well-known literary translators such as Gregory Rabassa (and our own inimitable Margaret Sayers Peden) to provide guidance and insight. We held readings by ALTA members and offered financial support to young translators to encourage them to attend meetings and hold readings.

Many other efforts and initiatives accompanied my tenure as president, but two of them I want to highlight here, one that succeeded in spite of setbacks and the other that failed in spite of my efforts to sustain it.

Although there was initial resistance to monetizing excellence in literary translation, I firmly believed that translators needed more visibility and recognition, and the best way to achieve that, I decided, was to have an annual cash award judged by a panel of ALTA members to recognize the best literary translation of the year. We secured several thousand dollars per year in prize money and set up tiers of judging committees to read and evaluate submissions, with a final judging committee to decide on the winner. We featured the award at a banquet during the

conference and even procured special National Translation Award stickers to place on the winning book. Even though our original sponsor withdrew after a couple of years, ALTA members by then believed in the award, and the Council voted to fund the award from its own funds. Over the years, that single award has blossomed into several more that focus on excellent translations from various genres and cultures.

My regret, on the other hand, is that ALTA leadership chose to terminate our membership in the International Federation of Translators/Fédération internationale des traducteurs (IFT/FIT), a group that I had worked tirelessly to promote within ALTA. I had been elected to the FIT board of directors from the United States and, with my university's financial support, had traveled to Finland, Germany, France, South Africa, and China for meetings to plan ways in which translators from around the world could unite in common activities to promote and recognize, among many other issues, excellence in translation. ALTA would thrive, I believed—and still believe—in a worldwide network rather than in isolating itself from other international groups. The dues for our membership were high, however, and I suspect that cost, alas, more than politics or cultural divisions, was the reason the alliance was dropped.

My experience of working in ALTA's leadership has been life changing. From an introverted Southern girl who loved books and writing, I entered a world that dazzled me with its complexity, beauty, breadth, and vitality. I met hundreds of exceptional people who hunger to communicate through translation with others around the world. And, for a short while, I played a small role on the stage where all that magic took place.

## David Ball

*2003*

We literary translators suffer many indignities. Reviewers often ignore the translation altogether, as if they were reading a novel written in English. They may praise “the style” of a novel written in, say, Hungarian, whereas they’ve read the English version and what they’re praising is what the translator wrote to put it into English. Or they may praise a translation for its “smoothness.” But what if the original was not smooth at all? We know we need to render the connotations, the tone, the rhythms of the writer while sticking as close as possible to the denotative meaning—a task that sometimes seems impossible, especially in poetry. Even literate people who are not translators understand little of this, especially in the age of Google Translate.

That’s why ALTA immediately struck me as a uniquely valuable organization. At last, people who understand what we do! Women and men who are concerned about literary translation, who love it and talk about their practice, the problems involved and suggestions for the best way of handling them, give practical advice about publishing, and so on.

When I was president of ALTA, another concern of crucial importance to translators came up. It is one we share with other organizations, especially PEN. The freedom to translate literary works from countries the United States didn’t happen to like was being infringed by the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC), “a department of the United States Treasury that enforces economic and trade sanctions against countries and groups of individuals involved in terrorism, narcotics and other disreputable activities.” OFAC was insisting we boycott not just oil or factory goods, but cultural products, even though the law was worded in such a way as to put them in a separate category. Publishing translations of Persian poetry or Cuban novels was suddenly verboten. ALTA voted unanimously to protest this action. Our members contacted representatives all over the country, wrote letters in local newspapers and did what we could to put an end to

this repression. These efforts and the actions of PEN and a few committed legislators eventually succeeded.

Another action that began under my presidency, I think, was the attempt to secure ALTA's funding and get members and others to invest in ALTA's future. This fund has grown considerably since then, and I am delighted to see it.

## **John Balcom**

*2005*

The mission of ALTA is simple and twofold: (1) to heighten the visibility of the profession, and (2) to create a means whereby literary translators can come together as a community to share ideas and experiences.

## **Gregary Racz**

*2011*

I joined the American Literary Translators Association in 1995 and attended my first conference in New York City in 1999, where I participated in a panel on formal poetics organized by Alexis Levitin. I have not missed a conference since and have presented a paper and/or read my work at every meeting. As far as I can remember, the mission of ALTA has always been and remains to “support the work of literary translators” and to “advance the art of literary translation,” but two watershed moments in the growth and transformation of the organization come immediately to mind in fostering these ends: the decision to become an independent association unaffiliated with UTD, where ALTA had been housed for decades since its co-founding by Rainer Schulte, and an intense reconceptualization of its prevailing strategies and methods undertaken by its Board of Directors at a retreat at Art OMI, the international arts center in upstate New York. The retreat was facilitated by Esther Allen.

Nothing could have prepared me for the shock I received as president, with president-elect Elizabeth Lowe beside me at UTD, when Dennis Kratz, who at the time was the Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities, announced that the university had decided it would be best



for ALTA to break its official ties with the university and seek its own independent non-profit status. At the time, ALTA had about five hundred individual and institutional members, but its operational structure was loose, as might be imagined under a co-founder who was also a professor in UTD's School of Arts and Humanities, director of its Center for Translation Studies, and editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Translation Review*. It was then that ALTA opened itself more to a wider swath of the membership on which it would clearly have to rely for organizational viability. This path toward innovative change was further secured when Russell Valentino assumed ALTA's presidency in 2013 (with Aron Aji as vice-president in the wings) at the conference in Bloomington, where Russell was a professor at the University of Indiana. Since it is ALTA's policy to pass the mantle of leadership at the conclusion of the Board of Directors meeting on the conference's first day, I inevitably became less involved in the association's day-to-day operations as an ex-officio member of the board but recall my invitation to a three-day summertime retreat at Art OMI as the next foundational moment in ALTA's move toward greater viability and independence.

It would be an understatement to affirm that the approach of the special consultant hired by the Board of Directors to help ALTA plot its possible future course was met with healthy skepticism. Time and again as she asked those gathered there to explain the "why" of our organization's existence, our answers began with our limited budget and how our financial constraints curtailed our association's vision. The consultant repeatedly pressed us, instead, to assert what we aspired to do and then come up with the ways (many of these simply regarding funding, say, through the increased sale of advertisements and fostering of partnerships) that such goals could be put into effect. It was largely her urging, advice, and guidance that led the Board of Directors to reconceptualize how ALTA should, could, and would remarshal its forces to shore up its fiscal standing in order to actualize its mission. Since that time, ALTA's greater outreach has buoyed membership and conference attendance; fortified its support of emerging translators and mentorship programs; stabilized its own finances; regularized its committee structure; broadened its

conferral of awards, and, perhaps most importantly, increased both its presence and influence in the field of literary translation in the United States and the world.

As a scholar and practitioner of literary translation whose work has followed close on the heels of the rise of the field of translation studies, ALTA has been my professional home for a quarter century. It has provided me not only a receptive venue for my work, but a scholarly framework for, and legitimization of, my academic specialty. Of course, translation has been part and parcel of intellectual and artistic pursuits since ancient times, but if James S. Holmes only coined the term “translation studies” in 1972, and George Steiner published his landmark *After Babel* in 1975, followed by Susan Bassnett’s review of the discipline in her foundational 1980 work *Translation Studies*, ALTA’s founding in 1978 came onto the scene in timely fashion, precisely during the burgeoning growth of the discipline. Now its membership is pushing one thousand with conference attendance hovering consistently around five hundred. One need look no further than the annual ALTA book exhibit—the largest in the country of exclusively translated titles—to see the wide-ranging impact the organization has had. It fell to me largely to steady the boat during a rocky transitional time, but I could not have shepherded ALTA into this new phase of its existence had it not been for the support and insight I received from past presidents and longtime members. Today ALTA is more influential than ever and no longer the seemingly impossible dream of a co-founder obliged to start small while forever thinking big.

## **Russell Valentino**

*2013*

During my time as president, we were essentially faced with the question of whether to try and be an independent arts non-profit or to take the model that we had enjoyed in connection with UTD and transfer it to another institution. We looked very carefully at other non-profits such as the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), reached out to colleagues in professional organizations that had faced similar challenges, and engaged a consultant to help us think through our options and canvass our membership. Our initial strategy was to create something that we thought corresponded to the contemporary mobile and digital environment in which we all live by setting up a rather portable structure with lots of digital redundancies such that the board members and staff, particularly those in the most crucial leadership positions, could do their jobs from wherever they happened to be. This worked pretty well at the beginning, but over time it became clear that it wasn't a viable long-term structure. Perhaps it is possible to set something up along the lines we had initially (and perhaps a bit idealistically) imagined, but we weren't able to make it happen. In the end, it became clear to those of us in the central leadership positions that having a stable home base was really hard to forego. We realized we needed a place with things as basic as a regular mailing address and a stable tax and accounting system rooted in a local environment where we could physically go when we needed help. We also needed a community connection that might help us with things like recurring conferences, local sponsorships, and long-term endowment development.

I started my term as president in something of an emergency. I was slated to take on the vice president's role, but on the eve of the 2013 conference, our president-elect at the time, Elizabeth Lowe, contacted me to say that she'd been diagnosed with a serious health problem and would not be able to take on her duties as president. Thankfully, she is doing quite well again

now, but at the time the board turned to me and asked me to serve. There wasn't anyone else to do it, so I agreed. I was then in my first year of chairing a department at a new institution—I had come to Indiana just nine months before. This meant that I didn't have the usual preparatory period before assuming the presidency and that I had lots of other things on my mind. And it was also at this exact moment that ALTA was transitioning from its long sojourn at UTD to something new, which meant we were heading into completely uncharted waters. UTD was very helpful in providing records and institutional knowledge, of course, but it was a lot of work, and looking back at it, I'm honestly not sure how we managed to do it.

I found local support at Indiana University through graduate assistants and the Executive Dean's Office in the College of Arts and Sciences, which provided financial support for travel. I reached out to colleagues in ALTA who, I knew, were committed and knowledgeable for advice and counsel. These individuals included Aron Aji, Susan Harris, Sean Cotter, Olivia Sears, Susan Bernofsky, and Esther Allen. Several agreed to become board members, and some of these individuals are serving in the current leadership still. Some months later I turned to my former student from the University of Iowa, Erica Mena-Landry, with whom I had collaborated on several projects at Autumn Hill Books and *The Iowa Review*, and whom I knew to be a tech-savvy, artistically sensitive, and extremely dynamic person. Erica and I worked for many months essentially as partners on a host of ALTA initiatives, feeding off each other's energy and enthusiasm. This was both good and bad. It propelled ALTA forward in profound ways—we added new awards programs, re-established our NEA collaboration, began receiving regular NEA funding for the annual conference, and became a literary partner of the AWP. But it also wore us both out and made it clear that what we were trying to do in the way that we were trying to do it was not really sustainable.

This realization came close to the end of my three-year term as president, and the executive committee (Aron Aji, Sean Cotter, Paul Daw, and myself) was by then seriously considering the potential benefits of a new affiliation with an institution of higher learning. It was agreed

to partner with the University of Arizona, a move that affords ALTA many new prospects and opportunities.

# ALTA Conferences

The first annual meeting of the American Literary Translators Association—to be held on November 10–11, 1978, at the University of Texas at Dallas—was announced in the inaugural issue of *Translation Review*, published in the spring of 1978. The conferences were usually held in October or November of each year in different locations across the United States, and the majority were held at, or in cooperation with, a university. In addition to the first conference being held at UTD, each decade conference (i.e., tenth, twentieth, and thirtieth) was held in Dallas as well. Three exceptions to this pattern were the twenty-first annual conference, which was held December 3–5, 1998, in Guadalajara, Mexico, the ninth annual conference, November 17–18, 1986, and the twenty-eighth annual conference, November 2–5, 2005, both in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

The ALTA conference was originally conceived of as a forum for established and aspiring literary translators who were working either in academia or as independent translators. From the beginning, the conferences included seminars and workshops on translation theory and practice, teaching of translation studies, professional concerns (such as copyright and publishing, funding and grants, and digital technology), reviewing translations, and the mentoring of future generations. Hallmarks of each conference were the language- and genre-specific workshops; the book exhibit that was run by a university or local bookstore (initiated at the seventh annual conference at Boston University); the bilingual readings (organized by Alexis Levitin and introduced at the tenth annual conference); and the *¡Declamación!*, which first appeared at the twenty-fifth annual conference.

Other important discussions that occurred at the conferences revolved around the importance for literary translation to be seen as scholarship in its own right by academia, the value of

teaching translation studies in the humanities, and the importance of reviewing works in translation. Another key feature was live performances of translations—usually of opera, theater, or music—at some point during each conference. Moreover, the membership and conference organizers were quick to develop relationships with publishers of translation, as well as other translation, literary, and humanities organizations such as PEN, FIT, ATA, AWP, and the NEH and NEA, and early on introduced seminars on digital technology. From 2005 to 2011, ALTA was awarded grants from the NEA for conference support.

The first ALTA Prize (later known as the National Translation Award [NTA]) was awarded at the fifteenth annual conference, the Endowment Fund Fellows (later known as the ALTA Travel Fellows Award) were first announced at the seventeenth annual conference, and the Lucien Stryk Prize was introduced at the thirty-fifth annual conference.

Gregory Rabassa, the legendary translator from the Spanish and Portuguese, holds the distinction for the greatest number of keynote and other addresses at the annual conferences. Many distinguished writers and poets gave addresses at the conferences, such as Czeslaw Milosz (recipient of the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature), poets and translators Robert Hass and Robert Pinsky, poets W.S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Yves Bonnefoy, and Homero Aridjis, novelist and essayist Carlos Fuentes, and pianist and composer Stefan Litwin.

In addition, two members published articles (based on speeches given at the conference) in *Translation Review*: Margaret Sayers Peden's speech titled "Teller of Other's Tales" was published as an article titled "Telling Others' Tales" in TR 24–25, 1987, and Samuel Hazo's "So True as to be Invisible" was published in TR 41.

The social atmosphere at ALTA conferences needs to be noted. There was a genuine sense of excitement at the conferences as friendships were renewed and new relationships established. There was a sense of an ALTA family. This happened because there was such a common ground for discussion and interaction between members. Individuals may have been working in very different languages, but the challenges and rewards of the translation process were shared

experiences. And, since translating can be a lonely and not always fully appreciated activity, the ALTA members knew right away at the conference that they were among colleagues, fellow travelers in the mysterious and deeply satisfying creative world of translation.

## **Chronology of ALTA Conferences**

First Conference, November 10–11, 1978

The University of Texas at Dallas

Second Conference, October 26–27, 1979

The University of Texas at Austin

Third Conference, October 3–4, 1980

The University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Fourth Conference, October 31–November 1, 1981

Indiana University, Bloomington, IN

Fifth Conference, October 29–31, 1982

Stanford University, Stanford, CA

Sixth Conference, November 4–5, 1983

Loyola University, New Orleans, LA

Seventh Conference, November 1–3, 1984

Boston University, Boston, MA

Eighth Conference, October 4–6, 1985

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR

Ninth Conference, November 17–18, 1986

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Tenth Conference, October 19–22, 1987

The University of Texas at Dallas



Eleventh Conference, October 19–22, 1988  
City University of New York Graduate Center

Twelfth Conference, November 8–11, 1989  
University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA

Thirteenth Conference, November 14–17, 1990  
San Diego State University, San Diego, California

Fourteenth Conference, November 6–9, 1991  
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL

Fifteenth Conference, October 28–31, 1992  
University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA

Sixteenth Conference, November 4–7, 1993  
Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA

Seventeenth Conference, November 3–6, 1994  
The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

Eighteenth Conference, October 26–29, 1995  
The University of Texas at Austin

Nineteenth Conference, November 7–10, 1996  
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN

Twentieth Conference, October 30–Nov. 2, 1997  
The University of Texas at Dallas

Twenty-first Conference, December 3–5, 1998  
Guadalajara, Mexico

Twenty-second Conference, October 20–24, 1999  
New York City, NY

Twenty-third Conference, October 18–22, 2000  
San Francisco, CA

Twenty-fourth Conference, October 24–27, 2001  
North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC

Twenty-fifth Conference, October 16–19, 2002  
Chicago, IL

Twenty-sixth Conference, November 12–15, 2003  
Cambridge, MA

Twenty-seventh Conference, October 27–30, 2004  
Las Vegas, NV

Twenty-eighth Conference, November 2–5, 2005  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Twenty-ninth Conference, October 18–21, 2006  
Bellevue, WA

Thirtieth Conference, November 7–10, 2007  
The University of Texas at Dallas

Thirty-first Conference, October 15–18, 2008  
Minneapolis, MN

Thirty-second Conference, November 11–14, 2009  
Pasadena, CA

Thirty-third Conference, October 22–23, 2010  
Philadelphia, PA

Thirty-fourth Conference, November 16–19, 2011  
Kansas City, MO

Thirty-fifth Conference, October 3–6, 2012  
Rochester, NY

Thirty-sixth Conference, October 16–19, 2013  
Bloomington, IN

Thirty-seventh Conference, November 12–15, 2014

Milwaukee, WI

Thirty-eighth Conference, October 28–31, 2015

Tucson, AR

Thirty-ninth Conference, October 6–9, 2016

Oakland, CA

Fortieth Conference, October 5–8, 2017

Minneapolis, MN

## **Speakers at ALTA Conferences**

Wallace Fowlie, “On Translating St. John Perse”

Margaret Sayers Peden, “Teller of Others’ Tales”

Wallace Fowlie, “Translating Rimbaud for a Rock Singer”

Gregory Rabassa, “Translating from Two Languages”

Gregory Rabassa, “The Translator’s Travails in Publishing”

Roger Shattuck, “A Belletrist’s Creed”

Samuel Hazo, “So True as To Be Invisible”

Breon Mitchell, “Franz Kafka and the Translator’s Trial”

John Felstiner, “Translating Celan/Celan Translating”

Carlos Fuentes, “Traitor/Translator”

John Felstiner, “On Translating Paul Celan”

Stefan Litwin, “What Does the Pianist Translate from the Score onto the Piano?”

Colonel (Ret.) Gregory Fontenot, “Mapping the Foreign: Translating Cultural Interactions”

Peter Theroux, “Arabic Translation in English: Be Careful What You Wish For”

Michael Henry Heim, “How Do You Know When You’re Ready to Translate from Another Language?”

Lawrence Venuti, “Towards Translation Culture”

David Bellos, “Translation of Humor”

## **Conceptual Expansion of Presentations at ALTA Conferences**

1978 Demonstration: University of Arkansas Translation Workshop

1984 Music: The Added Dimension of Translation

1987 Book Exhibit of Journals and Presses Publishing Translations

Bilingual Readings: Works of ALTA Members

1992 ALTA Prize

In conjunction with the International Poetry Forum

Focus Translation Workshops

1994 ALTA Fellows

Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry Fellows

Endowment Fund Fellows

2001 ALTA National Translation Award

2002 *!Declamación!*

2004 Welcome, Info and Tips for First Timers

2014 Offsite Bilingual Readings

2015 ALTA Emerging Translator Mentorships

# ALTA Bilingual Readings

by Alexis Levitin

## How It Began

For me literature is not *about* life, it is life. I don't want a protective distance from the pulsing thing itself. For me Moby Dick and Ahab throb with the heat of being alive, Hester Prynne stands silent and solid as a mountain. Antigone spits in my very face, and I am filled with admiration and awe. I squirm with Ivan Ilych before death. But modern criticism unfortunately has sucked away much of the lifeblood of literature. Criticism springing from theoreticians in France has made itself the central concern, relegating literature to the position of a convenient jumping-off point. I have been a professor for fifty years, but I don't want to profess. I don't want to talk *about* something. I want to help my students discover the pulsing *life itself* on the page and in themselves.

This yearning for the life flowing within words permeates my sense of translation, as well. Although the differences between grammar and syntax in languages can be fascinating to discuss, what I really love is the confrontation with the thing itself: *das ding an sich*. That is what Rilke thought poetry was about, and I agree. And the real beauty of language, the insistent call it makes to us, is in the sound. I love hearing foreign languages, even when I don't understand a word. I grew up in a household where Russian, German, French, and English intermixed. I was not appalled at my ignorance when bathed in these languages; I was delighted. I enjoyed being a small child surrounded by the wonder of differing sounds, as if resonating from diverse instruments in an orchestra. And that is how I feel at ALTA. I welcome the sound of the unknown

tongue; I welcome the mysterious music of otherness.

When I worked for years in Portugal with Fiama Hasse Pais Brandão (just listen to that name!), I remember that her *imprimatur* on my translations was always the same: *Soa bem!* It sounds good. She knew that, in the end, the sound was the heart of the translation. She knew that we do not translate just words, but the spirit within the words. And that spirit manifests itself through the music of the language.

I was rather astonished in the early days at ALTA that the living creature, the alien tongue, was rarely actually heard. We were all literary translators, presumably in love with the rich melodic differences between languages. Yet we had little chance to encounter that richness first-hand. It felt a bit as if we were in an interesting museum of natural history, while I really wanted to be in a vast, inclusive zoo, with the heavy odors and the snorting of the living beasts themselves. So, during the first ALTA conference outside the United States, hosted in French-speaking Quebec, I proposed to Rainer Schulte that we set aside a room for bilingual readings of poetry and prose from any language. Rainer immediately accepted the idea, and Sheryl St. Germain, an early executive secretary of our organization (and one of the most daring and provocative of modern poets) helped me organize the first ever ALTA Bilingual Reading sessions. We wrote the simple words *Bilingual Readings-Everyone Welcome* on an ordinary piece of typing paper and taped it to the door. And for the next three days the room was never empty, never silent. And that is how the bilingual readings began.

On the human level, the bilingual readings are essential for me and I believe, for all of ALTA. They give us the chance to present our work, to hear the work of our fellow translators, and to hear, most of all, the sound of the original prose and poetry, from languages we either know well, or a bit, or have never encountered in our lives. I know I must look a fool with a broad smile on my face, as I sit in these sessions entranced, listening with a deep commitment to a language, such as Korean, of which I do not know a word. But I still remember how forty years ago, when I organized an international poetry reading at Denison University in Ohio, a modest,

self-effacing librarian presented herself in full Korean regalia and recited poetry that brought tears to my eyes, though I could not understand a word. It was the music I understood, as is the case with Schubert or Chopin. I was, in a way, at a concert.

Let us listen, for a moment, at least, to the music of geography. Here are the countries represented in three typical years at the beginning of this new millennium: Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Spain, Basque Country, Cataluña, Portugal, Angola, Romania, Italy, Quebec, Haiti, Switzerland, France, Germany, Austria, South Africa, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Uzbekistan, Poland, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Greece, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Iran, Bangladesh, China, Vietnam, Japan.

On the practical level, I believe these readings have also served ALTA and its members well. Many of us are academics and cannot come to the conference without financial help from our home institution. But armed with a letter confirming participation in the readings, countless colleagues have been able to pry loose from their administrators the funding that enables them to join us at our national gathering. This practical dimension of the readings has, as a result, helped ALTA increase its membership and especially its conference participations. Over the years, the bilingual readings became so popular that, despite my desire to say “no” to no one, we finally had to draw limits, so as to keep this invigorating event within bounds. These are the rueful repercussions of success and, despite some chagrin, we remain happy with this enrichment of our relationship to the individual music of our own language and the languages of others. I always spend my entire three-day ALTA conference in the bilingual reading sessions and though, in the end, I may be exhausted, I am never bored, and I never have regrets.

# Book Exhibit at ALTA Conferences

The annual book exhibit at the ALTA Conference highlighted translators' published works and facilitated networking between translators working in the same language and between translators and publishers. The book exhibit also enabled publishers to present their translated texts, discuss future collaborations with translators, and to see firsthand how energized the field of literary translation was becoming. The book exhibit also gave members an opportunity to display their translation publications. Many productive discussions and partnerships occurred in the book exhibit context.



*The thirtieth ALTA Conference, the last one to be hosted at UTD, in 2007 had engaged four former presidents to project their views on the future of ALTA. The following section presents the speeches by John Biguenet, Breon Mitchell, Lynn Hoggard, and Marian Schwartz.*

# Speeches at 30th ALTA Conference

## *Defending the Future*

by John Biguenet

At an ALTA conference some years ago, I offered a meditation on the translation into English of the fifth canto of the *Inferno*, in which Dante encounters the damned couple, Paolo and Francesca. The sympathetic poet listens to the sad tale of how, one day, the woman and her husband's brother had read together of the adulterous Lancelot and his Guinevere until Paolo, as Francesca recalls, "*la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante*." Turning from the book, Paolo, she remembers avidly, "kissed my mouth all trembling," and then, somewhat more discreetly, the doomed beauty goes on to confess they read no further that afternoon.

Moved by the explanation of how the condemned lovers had succumbed to their "dubious desires," Dante swoons, and the canto closes with one of the most exquisite lines in the *Commedia*: "*E caddi come corpo morto cade*" ("And fell like a dead body falls").

But why does the poet faint? I could not explain it. I tracked back through the canto to the question with which Dante provokes Francesca's confession. But then I noticed Dante's own confession in the preceding lines: "Francesca, your torments make me weep with"—and here is his Italian—"tristo e pio."

Of our hundred or so translations of *The Divine Comedy* since Henry Francis Cary published the first complete English edition in 1814, nearly all have rendered Dante's heartache over Francesca's suffering as "sorrow and pity." But if that's what the poet felt, why should he swoon? Pity, even under the duress of grief, suggests superiority over the object of our sympathy. It is not

an emotion that leaves us senseless.

My Italian was a gift from my maternal grandparents, both born in Salerno. It was the language reserved by my aunts in Brooklyn for cooking and for gossiping about family scandals so that my cousins and I would not fully grasp the adventures of our uncles. My Latin, though, was learned first under the rigorous tutelage of Sister Claude, who envied us future altar boys the liturgical rituals forbidden at that time to women, and then under Father Augustine's instruction in the Benedictine monastery I entered after eighth grade. It was Father Augustine who elucidated the virtue for which *Pius Aeneas* was known, the respect for gods and parents. Raised in New Orleans, I was no stranger to the deference owed to anyone older; it was an obligation familiar to every Southern child in those days. Repeating "*tristo e pio*," I saw what I took as a possible error in the translation. Perhaps Dante didn't weep with sorrow and pity; maybe he was torn between grief and piety. Not piety for a god, though, but for Francesca, the aunt—I was to discover in my research—of a friend, Guido Novello. I began to understand why, caught between such powerful and conflicting feelings, the poet might swoon.

Was "pity" then simply a cribbed mistranslation that persisted through plagiarism? Lord Byron's brief translation, published as a poem entitled "Francesca of Rimini," persuaded me something else might be responsible. Byron translates only "*tristo*"; on the meaning of "*pio*," he remains mute. Perhaps he recognized what its possible mistranslation as "pity" reveals: we have no word in English for what Dante may have meant. "Pius" is the formal name of a series of Popes; "pious" means devoutly religious for us, is assigned exclusively to devotion to a deity. We speakers of English do not name that particular form of respect we owe a parent. Byron alone among the translators I examined had the courage to leave a lacuna where our language is silent.

The sorrow and the piety—those paired emotions are known to every translator, aren't they? We begin our work with piety for a text; we conclude with sorrow over our failure to conjure, in English, its reincarnation.

Similarly, turning a nostalgic eye over the last thirty years, I find I feel something of the

same contradictory emotions.

I look back over the first thirty years of the American Literary Translators Association with a great deal of respect for what we have accomplished. Members of our organization have made substantial contributions to the establishment of translation studies as a significant field of academic inquiry. ALTA has improved the status of translators in the publishing world and lobbied successfully on behalf of the support of literary translation by funding agencies. We have battled for the acceptance of literary translation as a substantial scholarly activity in promotion and tenure reviews. We have produced three decades of publications such as, most notably, *Translation Review*, as well as our newsletters, series of guides, and web site. We have held thirty annual conferences, in which the sense of community created in the very first meeting here in Dallas in 1978 has been nurtured and extended to new generations of translators. In short, we did what we set out to do thirty years ago: to create a permanent organization to represent the interests of literary translators and to provide a forum in which the art and the craft of translation might enjoy sustained debate.

Respect and regret—I know it’s not an exact translation, but it does manage, at least, to suggest the echo of vowels in *tristo e pio*. On the other hand, I’ve reversed the sentiments. Dante may end with respect, but I, with regret.

Of ALTA’s first thirty conferences, I’ve missed only two. My son was born five days before our third conference, in Amherst; when I walked into the maternity ward after his birth, my wife looked up from the baby she was nursing and firmly told me, “Don’t even ask.” We haven’t had a child since, so I did not miss another conference until two years ago, when I was forced to skip the meeting in Montreal because my own city, New Orleans, had been devastated a few weeks earlier by the Corps of Engineers of the United States Army. More than fifty breaches of defective levees designed, built, and maintained by the Corps killed 1,500 New Orleanians and destroyed an area seven times the size of Manhattan.

I mention these two absences because they both shape my view of the future of our

organization. First, I am no longer simply a father; I have a granddaughter. For the last thirty years, the present mattered most to me. Now, it's the future that's always on my mind. And second, over the last two years, I have witnessed firsthand that when you make war on that future—ravaging the environment, ignoring decaying infrastructure, deprofessionalizing government services, evading accountability, running up enormous financial and moral debts to be paid by generations not yet even born—that war on the future will come home with a fury one day, exacting a terrible price on those whose government pursued such reckless policies.

And what does all this have to do with the future of ALTA?

It is not enough merely to regret that publishers cannot find a market for works in translation, that academic programs in literary studies and creative writing are indifferent to the literatures of other cultures. We translators have an obligation as citizens, and the future of our nation depends, in part, on our success in bringing to our countrymen what we alone can provide: the translation of the foreign. However, we must do so not by disguising that Other as one of us but by expanding our perception of what we are in such a way as to include what had been, to us, foreign.

In translating literature, we are not simply salvaging the past; we are creating a future in which human interconnectedness is more apparent to our readers, in which the implications of our policies on others—including those who will come after us—are as imaginatively immediate and resonant as the fearmongering of the demagogues whose power depends upon the debasement of language.

# *Imagining the Future*

**by Breon Mitchell**

Many years ago, while still a student in high school in Salina, Kansas, my debate partner and I were challenged by our equally young opponents to imagine a future in which the US government cut off all foreign aid to countries refusing to toe whatever particular line had been drawn in the sand for them at the time. As the affirmative team, we were duty bound to advocate just such a Draconian measure. But we weren't about to fall for our opponents' transparent snare: predicting the future, we said, was a notoriously risky business, and unfortunately, we had left our crystal ball at home.

This clever reply turned out to be our undoing. "Crystal ball, my eye!" wrote the unimpressed judge, and added one word, all in caps and followed by three exclamation marks: "SARCASM!!!" This episode taught us a valuable lesson about how to lose a debate, but we remained convinced that we had done the right thing by refusing to look ahead to the consequences of our actions—always a depressing prospect and particularly so when it involved our government.

Our hesitation with regard to predicting the future was at least in part sincere—we didn't have a clue what awaited any of us. And there was so much future ahead, so little past. What did we know about anything?

Today all this has changed. Not that we are that much wiser, but the years now stretch out behind us and the future, on the personal level, has dwindled down considerably, so that some things are indeed becoming crystal clear, particularly for those of us who are senior citizens. We are within sight of the harbor in our leaky vessels.

Fortunately, imagining the future for institutions proves more enjoyable. Over time, organizations like ALTA may grow stronger, larger, more active, with no natural limit set to their

growth or longevity. And since, as past presidents of ALTA, we have been asked to say a few words about the future, and perhaps with a glance at the past, I will risk consulting that crystal ball on this special occasion.

I predict that the coming years will be rich and exciting ones for ALTA, filled with some turmoil no doubt, and inevitably tied to continued developments in literary translation itself, its place in the education of our young, in the academy, and in world culture as a whole. So much seems safe enough to say. But what does it mean, and how will it play itself out in our organization?

Those on our panel today, and all those sharing this moment with us, will be answering that question over time. I expect the focus of our shared activities to shift inevitably toward electronic exchange and digital information—no surprise there. Our publications, our intellectual exchange, our creative efforts will all be found in cyberspace. But I believe ALTA will continue to offer something of profound value above and beyond the computer screen: the human contact and sense of belonging that lifts each of us from his or her sometimes lonely daily struggle with words and binds us together.

Since its inception, ALTA's annual gathering has been the high point of the year for many of us. These meetings inspire us, invigorate us, make us want to do more, to do better. And they remind us that we are not alone. In a world in which translators have for so long been invisible, ALTA at last lets us see each other. One prediction then: the annual ALTA meetings will continue to be our heart and center—they will continue to bind us, to keep us concrete and real, to let us see each other as human beings, to remind us what all those words we put on paper, put in space, are all about.

The ALTA meetings have, in my experience, been unique in focusing upon the practice of literary translation and on the celebration of literature and literary translation through performance and readings. In a world filled with academic conferences and scholarly papers, I hope and believe that our future meetings will continue to bring together all those engaged in the

practice of literary translation and simply let them talk.

I also believe the future of ALTA includes the preservation of the past. Those of you who know me best are already familiar with this goal: to find and retain for future generations of students and scholars archival material relating to literary translation. Until ALTA was founded, there was little discussion of the important intercultural role of translators, and almost nothing was being done to record and recognize that role in literary history. ALTA has helped change all that—and in the years to come I trust and expect that ALTA will continue to serve as a conduit for the preservation of this unique material.

By now you may have already heard much of what I've said expressed more eloquently by other members of our panel. It should not be surprising if we share congruent views and hopes for ALTA's future. But I do want to close with two final remarks.

For all our good will, ALTA cannot survive without establishing a solid financial base. Annual dues alone will not accomplish this. Institutional support is needed as well. Without the substantial annual financial commitment of the University of Texas at Dallas to ALTA over the years, we would not be here today. We owe UTD a profound and ongoing debt of gratitude. We are equally indebted to the National Endowment for the Arts, both for their commitment to the field of literary translation and for their direct support of ALTA. But to ensure a bright future for ALTA, one last step remains: building up our endowment. Endowed funds based on the generosity of our members are central to our hopes for the future.

Finally, ALTA, like any organization, is dependent for its success upon its individual members. Your participation, your commitment, your energy will determine the future of ALTA. And, although not everyone can make ALTA a central part of their lives, someone must, or it will languish. I hope that some of you in the audience, hearing or reading these words, will rise to this final challenge—not simply to be a part of ALTA, but to make it central to your life. If you do, then we'll need no crystal ball to see the future.



# *ALTA in the Twenty-First Century*

by Lynn Hoggard

To use Rainer Schulte's phrase concerning the necessity of "thinking oneself into" a situation in order to act intelligently within it, how can ALTA think itself into the twenty-first century? That question appears to me to be linked to two others: (1) What will be the role of literary translation in this century, and (2) Can and should ALTA try to shape that role? Let's briefly examine several forces that impact literary translation.

First, in terms of communication—whether in business, politics, economics, religion, environment, or literature—the parts of the world are more tightly interrelated than ever before—as densely veined and netted as the best and ripest cantaloupes are said to be. In a big way, what happens in Myanmar no longer stays in Myanmar.

The primary tool promoting that density of relatedness is technology, which, along with relatedness, is another influence on literary translation in this century. The revolution in information technology brings with it unprecedented access to and transmission of information—e-mail, to use the simplest example, connects us anywhere instantly. For translators, virtual dictionaries and databases abound, as do blogs on translation subjects, sometimes with contributors around the world (a case in point would be *Wordreference.com*, where, for example, the Spanish word *milico*, which refers to a military figure, includes a discussion by individuals across Latin America and Spain about the shifting connotations of that term in each of their countries: a translator's mother lode!). To explore briefly one technological dimension, imagine having bilingual readings at future ALTA meetings in which the author, perhaps in Bolivia or Kurdistan, is virtually present to ALTA members to read and discuss the original while the translator talks to the writer from here! Imagine having the ALTA website grow into *the* fundamental resource for ALTA translation activities—including links to international dictionaries, translation chat rooms,

and every conceivable form of translation data.

Another influence on literary translation lies in the fact that the majority of United States citizens don't read their own literature, much less literature from other countries, and those of us in academe know the situation is growing worse: The next generation of college graduates is even less interested in reading than were their predecessors. The United States publishes relatively few translations in proportion to the total number of books published; in fact, among the world's industrial nations, we may well have the world's lowest percentage of translations published. If this situation is not a major problem, it is certainly an important challenge to ALTA's future.

Let's return to the first two features—global interrelatedness and technological innovations—both of which suggest that translation in this country might be on the verge of an explosion as we become increasingly aware of and involved with the world's individuals, cultures, languages, and literatures. ALTA's great contribution in the twenty-first century could be in its taking the lead to work with literary translators and authors around the world, using existing groups like the International Federation of Translators and its worldwide affiliates to promote that interaction. This development of a more intensely global literary translation community doesn't replace, but complements, our focus on the art and craft of translation.

In terms of ALTA's response to the unhappy status of literary translation in the United States, I see several possibilities:

First, ALTA could adopt a bunker mentality in which we lock down and work together as those do who know themselves under siege; it's not incorrect to regard ourselves as the "passionate few" who see literature and translation the way the Modernists saw art—as a refuge, a bridge to a better life, and, in some ways, even a salvation. Some of us in ALTA, I think, feel deeply bunkered and heartily welcome and affirm our fellow bunker mates.

A second option would be to adopt a revolutionary posture—that is, to take action from within the organization to influence our culture by more overtly promoting, highlighting, and

celebrating literature, translation, and translators. We could, for example, develop strategies to introduce, support and extend translation studies across the United States. We could more aggressively aid young translators, not only by recognizing their work and assisting them financially in coming to ALTA meetings, but also by helping them publish and by reviewing them when they do. With serious financial backing, we could sponsor ALTA translators in reading and book-signing tours across the United States. Also, with financial support (revolutions are expensive!), we could support a literary translation wing with one or more of the fine small presses we regularly celebrate at ALTA meetings and in *Translation Review*, allowing this press (or these presses) to publish additional excellent translations. We could hire a full-time translation marketer to promote the distribution and sale of translations in bookstores around the United States. The polite nod we get from the outside world when we announce our literary translation award each year might turn to curiosity if we had a second award that honored a fine translation for its contribution to knowledge (an award possibly open to translations of philosophy and literary scholarship). We could lobby at the national level to promote wider study of languages in general, since greater awareness of other cultures promotes greater curiosity about them. We could organize translation workshops, using teams of literary translators who work with university faculty and students across the country to show them the fun, the difficulty, and the savored pleasures of diligent translation activity.

A third and opposite option in response to low levels of literary awareness in our culture is for ALTA to stay the course—that is, to continue to do what ALTA already does quite well with its conferences, brochures, journal, newsletter, and website: to discuss, explore, critique, reward, and celebrate the fine translation of literature.

My view is that we would be foolish not to do—to the degree that we possibly can—all three of these things simultaneously: (1) to be restored by the aesthetic beauty of fine translation; (2) to engage in revolutionary activity (keep in mind that there has already been a lot of, if not revolutionary, then *evolutionary* activity in ALTA's first thirty years, as we've thought ourselves

into adding the ALTA Fellows program, the National Translation Award, the ALTA Endowment Fund, the ALTA Brochures, and the ALTA Website, to name a few); and (3) to keep doing well what we already do well. The tools of technology don't replace the fine rigors of translation, but tools do make a difference. Information technology is changing our era more quickly, more radically than the printing press changed the fifteenth and subsequent centuries. As we rethink ourselves, it's my great hope for ALTA that we remember the fundamentally global nature of our work and the increasingly global community to which we belong.

# *Vision Statement*

**by Marian Schwartz**

In its first thirty years, ALTA has contributed admirably to literary translation in the United States. Thirty years ago, literary translators had nowhere to congregate and no dedicated representation for addressing their concerns and promoting their interests. Thirty years ago, the wide-ranging institution that is now ALTA began with a handful of translators and modest activities. The organization has grown remarkably, and its range of activities—and the avenues for supporting them—have multiplied, always under the vigilant eye of its founding generation and, in particular, Rainer Schulte.

Any organization of this scope and ambition must inevitably address the issue of survival beyond its first thirty years and the guardianship of its first generation, and so too has ALTA, particularly in the last ten years. On the financial side, ALTA has set up an Endowment to provide an independent funding source down the line. But money, while by no means the root of all evil, is only part of the solution. Ultimately, ALTA will or will not survive because literary translators do or do not contribute their experience, concern, and simply their time to the organization.

ALTA has a tradition of bottom-up activism. If you started coming to ALTA conferences less than twenty years ago, you may not realize that our bilingual readings, now such a prominent feature of our program, began at a conference in Montreal, held in conjunction with the Literary Translators Association of Canada, when Alexis Levitin posted a sign-up sheet in the lounge so that people could read their translations to each other. At the time, this was a radical notion: sharing our translations instead of only talking about the process.

Member initiative has also helped bring us our website, the ALTA Guides to Literary Translation, the listserv, and the ALTA blog. The ALTA translation prize has always relied on help from members. We take these offerings for granted now, but they represent ALTA's

evolution.

ALTA's leadership has made conscious efforts to encourage this kind of participation by opening itself up to and indeed encouraging involvement and leadership in newcomers young and old, for example, with the ALTA Translation Fellows program. ALTA has its loyal first generation standing by in the wings to provide institutional memory and wisdom, but we have long since moved on to electing second- and third-generation ALTAns to office. Our conference program is filled with students, young practicing translators, and first-time participants. ALTA members participate more in the organization now than ever before.

These thirty years have seen problems for literary translation as well.

The years of ALTA's existence have been marked by a drastic decline in the publication of fine literature in general and of foreign literature in particular. In this time, ALTA has been a bulwark and refuge for active translators, academics, and students engaged in the attempt to reverse this trend. But there is so much to be done, and it can't be done without serious commitments of time and talent from members of the literary translation community. Unless ALTA moves forward as a member-driven organization and takes on the challenges as they arise, ALTA will cease to be effective.

One of these challenges, to my mind, is the digital future as it relates to literature and publishing.

The Internet and other digital media offer great potential for use and abuse. On the one hand, electronic publication not only lowers production and distribution costs but also offers formats that are not available to print publishing. On the other hand, the Internet poses a real threat to copyright. After all that literary translators and the organizations that represent them—including PEN and the International Federation of Translators, as well as ALTA—have gone through to establish translators' moral rights to their own output, this is hardly the moment to allow their infringement.

At the present time, therefore, copyright protection remains very much a live issue. We

may never be able to protect copyright in electronic media even as well as we protect it in print media. Nonetheless, that is no reason to reject electronic media out of hand, particularly given the exceptional promise they hold for increasing readership of foreign literature. In our day and age, when traditional literary publishing has become more rather than less problematic, it behooves us to explore every avenue for raising the profile of foreign literature.

Electronic publishing, be it on the Internet or through other digital media, has some obvious practical advantages. As I said, it reduces or eliminates altogether printing and binding costs, which can be prohibitive for small publishers especially. Works of literature published on the Internet have many more potential readers. Also, electronic publications can be linked to all kinds of graphic, audio, and background features. Bilingual publishing is much easier online.

With regard to sales, we have at least anecdotal evidence that electronic publishing actually increases rather than decreases print sales, that piracy results in a net sales increase for titles that are not in the top-selling ranks. At first glance, this seems counterintuitive. Why buy something you can read for free? The answer seems to be not only that humans derive pleasure from holding a book but perhaps even more that computers are distracting and ill-suited to long stretches of reading. (There's always e-mail to check, a reference to research, or an unrelated task to complete.)

A good example of electronic publishing leading to increased print sales is *Literature from the Axis of Evil*, an anthology published by Words Without Borders, some of whose contents appears on the Words Without Borders website. The book has sold tens of thousands of copies in hardback and is now out in paperback. There are doubtless many reasons for the book's success, but clearly electronic publication did not hurt sales.

What strikes me most about the Internet is how little we know about how it may help literary translation, and we have only the vaguest notion of what its negative consequences might be. For all we know, copyright protection may prove more rather than less reliable in electronic media. At this point, I think we have more questions than answers. If we remain passive about

new technology, we are more likely to be victims of the future rather than major players in its development. To paraphrase John Lennon for the twenty-first century, the Internet is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans. ALTA's officers and members need to make a concerted effort to learn about the opportunities available today in the digital world and prepare themselves to keep up with inevitable innovations.

In my vision of our future, ALTA will embrace electronic publishing as another way of bringing foreign literature to a significantly wider audience while vigilantly guarding the moral rights of literary translators.



## *ALTA Newsletter*

The first ALTA newsletter, written by Secretary-Treasurer A. Leslie Willson, was delivered to the membership in May 1980. This first newsletter indicates that the intention is for the newsletter to be issued three to four times per year as an “effective way of notifying members of matters of possible interest...[and] can also serve as a transmitter of information from ALTA members on matters of mutual interest.” Members were to send items of interest for the newsletter to the secretary-treasurer.

The newsletter often included letters from the presidents, recaps of previous conferences, and previews of upcoming conferences (along with tentative programs), in addition to reports from various committees and programs. Biographies of members running for office were also included in the newsletters that announced upcoming elections. Hallmarks of the newsletters were news items of interest related to literary translation and translation studies, especially fellowships, scholarships, and funding opportunities for translation projects, in addition to announcements of awards, prizes, conferences, institutes, and calls for submissions. There was also a section for members in the news that highlighted member publications, as well as grants and awards received by ALTA members, and readings, events, and performances featuring members.

Over the years, the newsletter was edited by various members: Marilyn Gaddis Rose edited the newsletter from December 1982 through October 1983; Elizabeth Gamble Miller served as newsletter editor from October 1983 through August 2006; the newsletter was edited by Lee Chadeayne from March 2007 through July 2010; Erica Mena edited the newsletter from February 2011 through January 2013; and Leah Leone took over editorship in May 2013.

# ALTA Guides

The ALTA Guides to Literary Translation are short guides, or brochures, ranging between ten and seventeen pages, which were written for new and aspiring translators, but are useful for experienced translators as well. These guides contain helpful information on preparing and publishing translations. Some hallmarks of the guides are the pertinent anecdotes written by experienced translators related to topics covered in each guide and the lists of “References” and “Useful Websites” found at the end of most of the guides. The guides were printed and sent to the membership and were (and still are) available on the ALTA website.

The membership approved the creation of the series of guides at the twenty-first annual conference in 1998, with the decision that Marian Schwartz would lead the effort. A number of established translators worked together on one or more of the guides: Trudy Balch, Bruce Berlind, Susan Bernofsky, Edward Gauvin, Anna Gericio, Liz Henry, Adriana X. Jacobs, Daniel Jaffee, Alexis Levitin, Carol Maier, Melissa Marcus, Rebecca McKay, John Pleucker, Beth Pollack, Olivia Sears, and Marian Schwartz. Five guides were produced by the ALTA committee members: *Breaking into Print* (2000), *Proposal for a Book-length Translation* (2002), *Promoting Your Literary Translation* (2003), *The Literary Translator and the Internet* (2008), *The Making of the Literary Translator* (2010).

*Breaking into Print*, with an introduction by John Balaban, covers suggestions on how to select appropriate texts (mostly shorter texts such as poetry and short stories) and how to gain permission to translate and to publish the translation. It also discusses the importance of the circulation list to keep track of where and when submissions were sent, provides guidelines for the submission package, advises how to deal with the inevitable rejections, and introduces some advice on book-length projects.

*Proposal for a Book-length Translation* includes a review of first steps, which are covered in the first guide, *Breaking into Print*. It goes on to offer advice on how to find a publisher who would be a good fit for the project in question, recommends sending queries before sending the full proposal, outlines the elements that should be included in both the query and the full proposal and discusses the length of sample translation that should be sent.

*Promoting Your Literary Translation* details the elements that should be explored, such as the issue of multiple submissions and advice on rejections.

*The Literary Translator and the Internet* addresses the importance of the translator's online presence, outlines promotion via the internet, and includes some guidelines for electronic publication of literary translation.

*The Making of the Literary Translator* covers the basics for becoming a literary translator, criteria for a good translation, and the development of skills for translation. The guide further suggests active participation in a literary community and gives tips on the use of digital technology.

# National Translation Award (NTA)

The National Translation Award was established in 1998. Every year ALTA presents the National Translation Award to an outstanding translation of a literary work. The award judges analyze the source text in the original language as well as the translation. In 2015, the award was divided into poetry and fiction. Winners are announced at the annual conference.

The idea of a new ALTA award to recognize an outstanding and recently published work translated by an ALTA member was first mentioned in the May 1992 newsletter (#47). The impetus for the creation of this award was to enhance the status of literary translation, improve the quality of literary translations, and increase the market for the publication of works in English translation. At the time, the prize was referred to as the New Annual Translation Award and would be given to as many as ten recently published works of contemporary fiction, contemporary poetry, contemporary non-fiction, and literature of the past in translation. For eligibility, works were required to be books or anthologies translated into English from another language and published in 1991. The nominated works would be judged on the basis of “the success of the translator in recreating the artistry of the original,” and the award-winning books would be announced at the upcoming ALTA conference.

In the February 1993 newsletter (#49), the award was referred to as the ALTA Outstanding Translations of the Year. The first awards reception for the ALTA Outstanding Translations of the Year took place at the ALTA conference in New York on Wednesday, November 18, 1997, at the National Arts Club. The award winners were presented with award certificates.

The May 1998 newsletter (#65) announced that the Larry McMurtry Center for the Arts and Humanities at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas, and the Rifkind

Center for the Arts and Humanities of the City College at the City University of New York had agreed, as of fall 1998, to co-sponsor cash stipends for the ALTA Translation Awards, which was renamed the National Translation Award.

The February 2001 newsletter (#73) announced that the NTA awards would be \$2,000.00 and in 2002, the award was increased to \$3,000.00. The 2004 conference was the first annual conference to include a reading from the NTA winners. The March 2010 newsletter announced that the NTA winner at the thirty-third annual conference, held October 20–24, 2010, in Philadelphia, would receive \$5,000.00.

# ALTA Fellows

ALTA awards three to five ALTA Travel Fellowships each year to promising translators so that they can attend the annual ALTA Conference. Each fellow receives a stipend of \$1,000 that is used for travel and accommodation expenses related to attending the annual ALTA conference.

The selection process for the ALTA Fellows is as follows: applications, including the translations, are sent to the Dallas Office. Then each of the applications is sent to two experts in the respective language. If both outside evaluators deem the application to be excellent or very good, then a travel fellowship is awarded to the applicant.

Funding of the fellowships in the past years has been by private donations from specific ALTA members.

# ALTA Endowment

**by Thomas Hoeksema**

In 2001, an ad hoc committee of ALTA members met for three days in Dallas to establish The ALTA Endowment. Thomas Hoeksema gave a presentation that outlined how ALTA's status as a 401-c-3 organization would allow it to raise funds that would provide a permanent source of income for the organization. The non-profit status of ALTA enabled tax-free contributions.

The committee outlined several goals for this ambitious project. Best practices of fund-raising and gift-giving were discussed that would encourage support for and participation in the Endowment. Endowment funds were not to be used for operational expenses. Draws from the Fund would only be made after the Fund reached \$1,000,000, and then only for expenses approved by the Board.

It was determined that management of the Fund would be directed by an Investment Committee with rotating members appointed by the Board. Paul Daw served for 15 years as the chairman of the Investment Committee, and his outstanding leadership was key to the success of the Fund. The Investment Committee reported to the Board and made recommendations on investment strategy, but the Board had final approval.

Brochures explaining and promoting the Endowment Fund were introduced at the 2003 ALTA Conference. The primary donor base for the Fund was the ALTA membership, and members were encouraged to consider many levels of gifts, including bequests, estate gifts, and gifts of stock. An appeal was made at the end of each year to encourage gifts that would have tax benefits.

The ALTA Endowment has been a successful enterprise. The Fund is well over \$500,000

in 2020, and because it has a moderate- to low-risk portfolio objective, it has had consistent gains over time and minimal losses during downturns in the market.

The overall goal of the Endowment Fund was to secure the future of ALTA. Establishing a Fund in perpetuity proved to be an especially important development since ALTA became an independent organization in 2016 and could no longer rely on the University of Texas at Dallas for operational funding. Proper oversight of the Endowment should enable ALTA to function as a viable organization into the future.



# *Translation Review*

Inaugurated in 1978, *Translation Review* is published three times a year. *Translation Review* addresses all critical and theoretical aspects of transplanting a literary text from one culture into another. *Translation Review* provides a forum for translators to discuss the creative process involved in the transplantation of literary texts from foreign languages into English; for translators and scholars to investigate the subtle nature of linguistic, semantic, cultural, historical, and anthropological considerations underlying translation activities; for critics to establish a meaningful vocabulary to evaluate the quality of literary works appearing in translation; and for the general reader to be continuously informed about translations of literary works published in book, journal, and anthology format. *Translation Review* serves as a major scholarly and critical journal to facilitate cross-cultural communication through the refined art and craft of literary translations.

*Translation Review* publishes interviews with translators, articles on the theory and practice of translation, on the teaching of translation in colleges and universities, and on the application of translation methodologies for the interpretation of literary works. It also includes profiles on publishers and developing trends in publishing literary translations and reviews that focus specifically on the translation process and the evaluation of translations.

## **Special Issues of *Translation Review***

Issue 1, Spring 1978 — Inaugural issue

Issue 8, 1982, Special Issue: A Look at German Literature in Translation

Issue 10, 1982, Special Issue: A Look at Japanese Literature in Translation

Issue 17, 1985, Special Issue: Women in Translation

Issue 19, 1986, Special Issue: Medieval Literature

Issue 32–33, 1990, Special Double Issue: Poetry in Translation

Issue 40, 1992, Special Issue: Swiss Literature

Issue 65, 2003, Special Arabic Issue

Issue 70, 2005, Special Issue: Chinese Literature

Issue 76, 2008, Special Issue: Albanian Literature

Issue 77–78, 2008, Special Double Issue: Latin American Literature

Issue 81, 2011, Special Issue: Nueva York

Issue 83, 2012, Features a Special Section on The Future of Translation

Issue 87, 2013, Special Issue: Catalan Literature and Translation

## *Annotated Books Received*

*Annotated Books Received (ABR)*, launched in 1995, is published twice a year as a supplemental publication of *Translation Review*. Its aim is to support the work of ALTA members and literary translators, as well as students, teachers, and readers of literature in translation. In order to highlight the preeminence of literary translation to these interested individuals, *ABR* provides descriptions of recently translated books (some pre-publication) in a format consisting of brief annotations (250–350 words). Each annotation provides information about the translated work and its author, as well as background information on each of the translators in order to establish their qualifications and achievements. Each semiannual issue of *ABR* consists of an average of seventy annotations of translated novels, short fiction, poetry, essays, and non-fiction. The original languages range from Algonquin to Yiddish, as well as translations from such arcane and esoteric languages as Sumerian, Mayan, and Tigrinya. The annotations also cover books on such topics as translation theory, translation studies, and multi-language anthologies.

# The ALTA Office

by Eileen Tollett

ALTA Executive Administrator from 1991 to 2003 describes the duties and functions of the ALTA Office.

The ALTA Executive Administrator was a staff member of the Center for Translation Studies at The University of Texas at Dallas. The administrator was responsible for the following duties: communication with the ALTA members, the daily management of the ALTA office, and the organization and the practical design of the annual Conferences. Originally, the title for the position was Executive Secretary, which was changed to Executive Administrator under the tenure of Dr. Tollett. The Administrator worked in close contact with ALTA Board Members and reported to the president on a daily basis.

UTD office day-to-day duties centered around member services, but the Administrator was also responsible for running the office itself. Hiring, supervising, and training office staff and overseeing files were part of these duties. With more than 300 members, ALTA member services centered on managing communications. The renewal of the annual membership was a continuous duty, primarily because memberships were renewed in all months. Perhaps October brought half those renewals, while others were scattered throughout the year. Eventually, ALTA changed that renewal process to once-a-year processing, primarily to ease staff time. At first, renewal notifications were all done by mail, but as the internet and email were used more, initial renewal notices were sent by email.

Often members contacted the ALTA office regarding questions of membership, publishing possibilities, academic possibilities, or public relations opportunities. The office maintained

various databases from which we could send information to individual members or groups. Sometimes we referred members directly to other members who could assist them.

Along with direct member services, the Administrator worked with the editor Elizabeth Miller on the *ALTA Newsletter*, editing, and contributing information as needed.

ALTA Fellows applications and ALTA Prize submissions all came through the UTD ALTA office. Each had to be recorded and distributed to the proper committee for review and decisions. All translations submitted to ALTA by publishers had to be processed and distributed for review and stored in the UTD Library's extensive collection. One of the innovations to be featured in *Translation Review* was the section on *Annotated Books Received*, which presented short annotations on recently published translations. The Administrator, together with research assistants, wrote these annotations. The Administrator also supervised the building and maintenance of a database dedicated to the recording of translations published by ALTA members.

All banking and investment procedures and activities were the Administrator's responsibility, with reports given to the ALTA Board at any board meetings or in special notifications, as necessary. I personally, as Administrator, particularly enjoyed the work on ALTA Conferences.

Often, a member volunteered to host the annual conference. Once the board members approved the city in which a Conference was to be held, the Administrator took over, first choosing the meeting/housing venues. If at a university, the hotel had to be chosen. If not, the hotel that could host the conference was particularly involved. I always flew to the city and visited numerous hotels in making the decision. Sometimes holding the conference at my preferred hotel was impossible because of costs. I had to keep in mind that most ALTA members were on limited expense budgets, often determined by their university, and had to stay within room rate limits because of that restriction. After deciding the hotel, I examined means of transportation from the airport to the hotel, decided menus for various dinners or receptions, chose meeting rooms and audio-visual equipment, assigned registration areas, parking, and billing procedures. The best hotel staff I ever worked with was at the New Yorker Hotel in Manhattan. Much to my surprise

and amusement, at the end of the conference, they offered me a job any time I wanted to work for them.

Once hotel and transportation decisions were made and approved by the conference host, the Administrator sent notification to members, along with a call for panels and readings. After panels were approved and readings submitted, I worked with the host to decide panel schedules, and then worked with the hotel for specific assignments to meeting rooms and reading rooms for each session. In addition, each conference featured a keynote speaker. The Administrator negotiated finances, travel, and hotel rooms as necessary.

The Administrator designed the conference program, with approval from the host, listing times, rooms, and participants in panels and readings. The final printing of the program was the Administrator's responsibility.

Transportation and rooms for any ALTA staff attending the conference to help with registration or member services was the Administrator's duty also. Prior to the conference, the ALTA office prepared all necessary registration sign-in and payment forms, indicating pre-payment and receipts. They also conducted registration itself, recording and handling member payments and any other income received, and distributed receipts of payment. At the end of the conference, payment of the hotel was the duty of the Administrator.

At the conference, the Administrator sat in on the Board meeting, giving an annual report to the Board, and then presenting a similar report to the entire membership.

# Lucien Stryk Asian Translation Prize

The Lucien Stryk Asian Translation Prize was inaugurated in 2009 to recognize the importance of the translation of Asian works of literature into English. Lucien Stryk was an internationally acclaimed translator of Japanese and Chinese Zen poetry, a renowned Zen poet himself, and former professor of English at Northern Illinois University.

The prize was established for book-length English translations of either poetry or source texts from Zen Buddhism, or translations from Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Kannada, Korean, Sanskrit, Tamil, Thai, or Vietnamese into English.

Submissions are judged according to the literary significance of the original and the success of the translation in recreating the literary artistry of the original. The Lucien Stryk Asian Translation Prize is primarily intended to recognize the translation of contemporary works of Asian literature; however, re-translations or first-time translations of important older works are also considered.

# National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)

From its earliest years, ALTA was recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as an important and unique organization worthy of support. ALTA was fortunate that several NEA Directors understood the significance of supporting the work of translators as agents of cultural transmission on a national as well as international scale. NEA grant proposals were developed by ALTA staff. This grant funding contributed significantly to ALTA's success over the decades, and NEA recognition elevated the cultural status of ALTA in the broader literary world.