

OUT & ABOUT

ATLAS: Association for the promotion of Literary Translation

Six questions to *Jörn Cambreleng*

The International College of Literary Translators in the city of Arles is one of the 14 RECIT centres of literary translation, and its director, Jörn Cambreleng, replies to questions put to him by Counterpoint.

Can you tell us about CITL?

People often get confused between CITL and **ATLAS**, the place and the structure that underpins it. The ATLAS association was founded at the end of 1983, with the prospect of the first conference on literary translation, known as the *Assises de la Traduction Littéraire*, which took place in 1984. The idea of a permanent location, that was to be the International College of Literary Translators, emerged very quickly and was housed in the *Espace Van Gogh* from November 1989. It is said that the first residents from Central and Eastern Europe saw the wall fall from the CITL. A residency model had already existed in Germany since 1980, and its founder, Elmar Tophoven, was also one of the founding members of ATLAS (along with Laure Bataillon, Françoise Campo-Timal,

Hubert Nyssen and many others). This German residence, **Straelen**, had drawn its inspiration from medieval Toledo in honouring collaborative translation. The concept of a meeting place and a place of exchange is still hugely relevant today in Arles: the fact that we have ten rooms for residents allows it to exist. This is particularly important for a profession that is in essence largely solitary, given that the daily life of a translator is essentially made up of face-to-face meetings with the text. Yet the idea of a translation residency is also linked to the idea of a retreat, of spending time away from the daily grind and finding the necessary calm and concentration.

Currently, in addition to the translation residencies outlined above, we are also developing a new type of residency, linked to an exploration of new voices to be translated. This is the purpose of our *Levée d'Encres* programme.

ATLAS's activities are mainly financed through public funding (state and local

authorities), but also through its own income, which derives mainly from public procurement. Another important source of funding is Sofia, which collects library loan fees and finances activities of general interest such as ours.

Apart from hosting translators in residence, what other activities does the CITL engage in?

The Conference has become a literary event that is open to all, and this is something we never lose sight of, because the French word Assises, with its strong legal connotations, remains intimidating, since it refers to something for specialists. We also offer another springtime literary translation event, *Printemps de la traduction*, in Paris hosted by the Maison de la Poésie.

Meanwhile, ATLAS is also a certified training organisation, which for the past twelve years has greatly contributed to the renewal of the generations of French translators worldwide, notably through its flagship programme called ‘The Translator Factory’ (‘La Fabrique des traducteurs’) which has already trained 150 young translators in 14 language pairs. ATLAS also offers ongoing training workshops for experienced translators.



The residence
Photo: Association ATLAS

Furthermore, one of our key tasks is to make the public aware of the cultural role of literary translators and to highlight their craft. To this end, we run a variety of programmes, both through public events and through promoting the art of translation, for example, through a literary translation competition – the ATLAS Prize for high school students. Our cultural activities are also aimed at audiences that may be less familiar with literature: *Quai des langues* is aimed at exiles in the process of integration, based on the idea that a positive experience of translation will enhance their language and culture of origin and encourage them to learn French.

In this joint **March 2023 publication**, Atlas and ATLF (the French Association of Literary translators) warn about the imminent dangers of AI in their field – literary translation – which they continue to insist is an essential and deeply human intellectual activity. The text is available in Spanish and English and is being translated into several other languages.

In the same vein, can you tell us about the **ATLAS Machine Translation Observatory**?

Having noted the spectacular progress of generative algorithms for machine translation, five years ago we set up a long-term observation system. Contrary to popular belief, which extolled the results of these machine translations, there has been no change in the nature of so-called ‘neural’ translation, with

the application of ‘artificial intelligence’ techniques. The rationale behind this is statistic-based, but it is supported by big data: the algorithm looks for the most probable translation, and therefore the most standardised, i.e. the furthest from singularity and style. Its effectiveness is based on the size of the mass of data available. In order to learn a style, a machine must be trained on a particular corpus, which is not cost-effective today. While these are relatively obscure topics, they are regarded with certain fascination, leading some publishers to believe in productivity gains and to propose that literary translators change jobs by becoming machine pre-translation proofreaders, and move towards what is known as ‘post-editing’.

The translation profession, like the fields of illustration and computer coding, is at the forefront of anthropological changes that concern everyone (doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.). ATLAS endeavours to anticipate, inform and accompany the changes that are taking place with unprecedented brutality, by helping to clearly identify what distinguishes a literary translation from a translation generated by an algorithm.

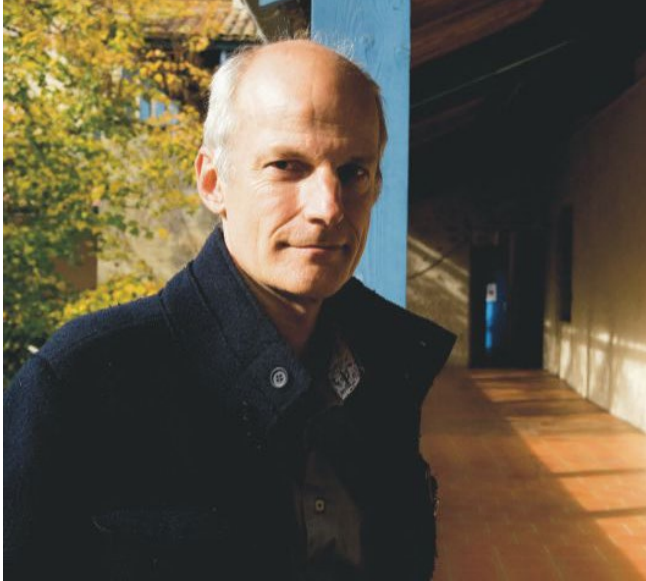
“The idea of a translation residency is also linked to the idea of a retreat”



The gardens of the residence
Photo: Association ATLAS

In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges facing literary translators (in Europe) at this time?

The challenges are numerous. It is likely that the appeal of productivity gains will lead to the development of a low-cost translation sector which, by pillaging the work of humans and stepping into a legal vacuum, will devastate an already considerably weakened professional landscape. The performance of algorithms is indeed spectacular, but it must be distinguished from intelligence. The term artificial intelligence carries with it a fallacy that still captivates the world. It is imperative that we make it clear that translation is an interpretation, that it is a subjective reading of a text, and therefore a work of the human mind, that a language conveys something other than information, that literary translation is a creative craft. The report ‘**Translators on the Cover**’ produced by the OMC expert group of the EU member states says it all: cultural diversity cannot be achieved without increased public funding for literary translation. This financial backing is justified by the fact that translation is a constituent part of our European identity.



*With a background in theatre, **Jörn Cambreleng** has translated Schiller, Wedekind, Gerhart Hauptmann and R. W. Fassbinder, among others, for the stage. For many years a reader for France Culture, he has long been a close observer of contemporary dramatic writing. A former director of the École Supérieure de Théâtre de Bordeaux-Aquitaine, he now gives priority to his work as a translator, and, as director of ATLAS, his attention is clearly focused on the cause of literary translation.*

Jörn Cambreleng
Photo: Romain Boutillier

In your opinion, what is the role of the CITL in particular and of translators' residencies in general, in the world of literary translation?

The CITL must move towards enabling literary translators to become agents in the book chain (in the sense of taking an active part), rather than executors. If they remain in the 'ancillary' position described by Antoine Berman, they run the risk of becoming mere subordinates, of being placed at the service of machines, and of doing work that is less and less gratifying and increasingly alienating. Translators must stand up for their work and proclaim it loud and clear in the public arena. Contrary to what some media think, we are lucky, readers are interested!

What about you? What is your own background, and what brought you to CITL?

I did my first translation during my residency at CITL. That was in 1995. I fell in love with the place and the opportunities it offers. After spending some time in the world of theatre, I applied for the position of director in 2008 with a view to consolidating the existing resources and developing training. The structure has grown a lot since then. In 2023, we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of ATLAS.

*Translated from the French
by Penelope Eades-Alvarez*