



## Interview with Breon Mitchell, Lilly Library (Indiana University Bloomington, USA)

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## Interview with Breon Mitchell

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For this issue of *Meta* devoted to translation archives it seemed only fitting that we give voice to one the pioneers of the field, a tenacious advocate for collecting and preserving translators' papers. As Director of the Lilly Library at the Indiana University Bloomington, Professor Breon Mitchell built one of the largest, if not the largest, archive of translators' papers in the world. In February-March 2020 Professor Mitchell and I exchanged emails about the history, acquisition strategies and management of the Lilly Library collection, as well as the relationship between translators and their papers. Those questions and answers are reproduced below, unredacted.

### ***AC: How did the Lilly Library come to be a centre for translation archives?***

BM: New initiatives at a rare book library often depend on the special interests of the Director. For example, my predecessor, William Cagle, loved French literature, and over the course of his tenure he expanded the Lilly's holdings in both early and modern French literature into one of the strongest collections in the U.S., both through purchases and by encouraging donors with similar interests. When I became Director of the library in 2001, I also started building new collections in areas of special interest to me, including literary translation.

I'd formed many friendships with fellow translators over the prior decades, and had often encouraged them to save their papers. But it was only when chance brought me to the directorship of the library that I had the opportunity to actively create a centre for translation archives. I began by contacting my closest friends in the translation world. Here is the letter that I would send them:

Dear ...

The importance of translation in international cultural transmission has not received the full attention it deserves, particularly in scholarly institutions and rare book libraries. I'm worried that this vital material will be lost to future generations if we don't save it now.

My goal is to create a broad archive of translation manuscripts and materials at the Lilly Library for study by both literary scholars and students of translation (including correspondence with authors, but also translators' correspondence with publishers, translators' manuscripts, translators' annotated copies of books they've translated, etc.).

In line with this larger purpose, I want you to know that I would love to preserve the entire corpus of your own translation manuscripts and correspondence. Your papers would be honored and preserved as the [translator's name] manuscript collection.

Major translators who have already donated or promised their papers to us include [names of well-known translators' archives held at or promised to the Lilly at the time of the letter]. In addition we also hold translation manuscripts of Ezra Pound and many other key authors, as well as a large number of important letters (for example, from Bertolt Brecht to his first American translator, and from Upton Sinclair to his German translator). We are also the official repository of the archives of the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA).

Your contribution to international literary life has been an important one and the record of it should be preserved. It often comes as a comfort to all concerned to know that such a record will not be lost. This is our goal at the Lilly Library.

Although I retired as Director in 2012, the library has continued to build its holdings in this area, and currently includes the archives of over one hundred translators from around the world, both donated and acquired by purchase. It is among the largest collections of translators' archives held at any institution.

**AC: How do translators feel about having their archives preserved for scholarly study? Do they have any hesitation when you contact them? Do any of them simply refuse to consider it? If so, why?**

BM: Few translators actively seek to place their papers in an institution. In most cases, I believe this is due to inherent modesty. When Leila Vennewitz wrote the British Society of Authors some years ago to ask who might be interested in preserving the letters she'd received from Heinrich Böll, they advised her to contact the Lilly Library. Over the course of our conversations, she was surprised to learn that the Lilly wished to preserve her own letters as well, and the entire record of her life as a translator.

Her reaction was not atypical. Many translators are surprised when they are contacted about their papers. When I first told Barbara Wright that I hoped she was keeping drafts of her translations, she replied, "Who would care?" Convincing translators that someone does care about their work, and telling them why, is a crucial part of preserving the global cultural record of literary translation.

Some translators were initially contacted by institutions interested only in the letters they'd received from famous authors. At least three were poets who had offered to donate their archives to their home institutions. They were told that while their own manuscripts

were welcome, there was no room for their literary translations. Those papers are now at the Lilly.

Over the course of time, I believe more and more literary translators are gaining a sense of the importance of their role in international culture and how crucial preserving their papers is to scholarly study. But two issues often cause them to hesitate (and sometimes refuse) to give their archives to an institution. The first is privacy. As Barbara Wright memorably wrote:

I'm also a bit scared because I realise that it's more or less going to be like revealing my whole life to anyone who wants to poke his or her nose into it. (All right, I could have phrased that less scornfully...) And that seems to me to be against my nature.... But when I was told that [a friend] had kept all my letters... Well, I kind of woke up. And I realized that ALL the things one does, spontaneously, and just because one is alive ... are, in a way, there, engraved in stone.

So clearly, the thing to do is to carry on regardless (which was a saying during the war!), but be aware that God's, or Buddha's, Databank has got you taped, whether you like it or not.

The second issue is whether to allow others to see the inevitable errors and misunderstandings that often litter early drafts of translations. A sense of professional pride seems to prevent some translators, and particularly those who are, by their very nature, extremely private in other respects, from opening themselves up about their work. They do not differ in this respect from famous authors who wish to be judged by their published works alone. My greatest disappointment in this regard was that we could not save the papers of Ralph Manheim, whose career as a literary translator was among the most important in the second half of the twentieth century. Ralph was a true friend, but he never gave in to efforts to save his papers. Whenever he finished a translation, he destroyed all the steps that led up to the finished work and placed the book on his shelf. I understood and respected his decision, but it was a true loss. Happily, however, all Ralph's personal copies of his translations will be preserved and honored by the Lilly Library through the generosity of Julia Allen-Manheim.

Fortunately the great majority of literary translators overcome their fears about privacy, and of exposing themselves to criticism of their work, and are pleased that their manuscripts will remain available to students and scholars for years to come. Archives are a cultural form of ongoing existence. Translators have earned a place in literary history, and they deserve to share in that afterlife.

Authors too seem pleased to see their translators recognized. During his lifetime, Kurt Vonnegut sent translations of his works directly to the Lilly as they appeared, and J. M. Coetzee has kindly done the same. Many of our author archives include substantial collections of their works into the various languages of the world.

Authors also know that a true picture of their creative life is illuminated in a special way by their correspondence with translators. Sten Nadolny, a noted German novelist, sent this note to Lynda and me while we were translating his latest novel, *Das Glück des Zauberers* (The Joy of Sorcery):

Wenn ich mir die Korrespondenz mit meinen Übersetzern und natürlich besonders mit Ihnen ansehe (ich ordne gerade meinen Nachlass fürs Archiv), dann weiß ich: Das

sind die wichtigsten Briefe, Sätze, Verdeutlichungen zu meinen Büchern, Absichten und über mich selbst. Vieles andere (Fotos, Kalender, Rezensionen, sogar die Manuskripte) sagen nicht so viel aus! Sehr gut, dass es in der Lilly Library dafür einen besonderen Platz gibt!"

When I look through my correspondence with my translators and, of course, especially with you (I'm currently arranging the papers in my archive), I realize this: They represent the most important letters, statements and clarifications about my work, my intentions and myself. Many of the other things (photos, calendars, reviews, even the manuscripts) don't say as much! It's good that there's a special place for them in the Lilly Library.

***AC: Can you describe the range of materials relating to translation that can be accessed at the Lilly Library?***

BM: We are interested in preserving as wide a range of materials relating to translation as we can. This includes translators' correspondence with authors and publishers, drafts of their translations, annotated copies of the books they've translated, copy-edited manuscripts, contracts, corrected proofs, material relating to the design and production of the books, and copies of the final published translation, including annotations in such copies for future revisions. We also preserve the paraphernalia of translation: dictionaries, notebooks, word lists, computer disks, correspondence with other translators and friends relating to translation, and any book from the translator's library inscribed to or from another translator. The archives may also include files of the translator's lectures, photos, certificates and awards—indeed some archives are so broad as to include significant correspondence with family and close friends, and other personal material any biographer would find of interest.

Whenever I was asked by a fellow translator what they should include in their archive, I would list most of the items above. When in doubt, I told them, send it along and we can decide for you--we want to preserve the entire *gestalt* of your creative life.

***AC: What factors influence which translators' papers the Lilly Library collects?***

BM: The most interesting archives for the Lilly are those of major translators with a significant body of work, who by chance or design have preserved almost all the material relating to their lives as translators (Barbara Wright and William Weaver are salient examples).

But many important translators in our collections have smaller archives that are still of major interest: the papers of Michael Henry Heim, for example, are highlighted by his fascinating and lengthy exchange (in Czech, English and French) with Milan Kundera on Heim's translation of *The Joke*, while the poet David Young's translation file is "limited" to a detailed two-decades long correspondence with Miroslav Holub and scores of original typescripts sent directly to him by the Czech poet.

We are also pleased to receive smaller archives from lesser-known translators, including those still early in their careers. It is never too early to start preserving such materials.

***AC: Does the Lilly Library have a budget to acquire translators' papers and if so how does it decide what to acquire? Are there formal guidelines?***

BM: The Lilly Library has an acquisition budget that permits it to collect in all areas of the library's interests. But as a major library devoted to rare books and manuscripts, only a very small portion of the Lilly's budget is available for any one area. The majority of our archives were acquired through donations. Our investment in the archives is still substantial, however. The cost of preserving, cataloguing and rendering archives accessible for research is considerable.

There are no formal guidelines for acquisitions at the Lilly Library. The library was built in 1960 to house the great collection donated to Indiana University by J. K. Lilly, who wished to preserve "the best that has been written and thought." It's up to the Director and Curators of the Library to fulfil this goal and to interpret it for present and future generations.

***AC: Does the Library aim to be representative of all kinds of literary translation and translators? Does it collect materials from other kinds of translation?***

BM: The Lilly views the area of literary translation quite broadly—there is no limitation with regard to language or genre, although the vast majority of the material is, perhaps inevitably, either translated to or from English. Many of our translation archives include non-literary material, such as works of literary scholarship, biography and essays. The library also collects the first published translation of major works in human thought, both into and from English.

***AC: Does the Lilly Library distinguish between translators and author-translators when building its collection? Can such a distinction be seen in its catalogue?***

BM: The library builds its collections on the basis of the intrinsic interest of the material, without distinguishing between translators and author-translators. Almost all of the archives are identified simply by the individual's name. The description and inventory of each collection reveals the major areas of his or her creative life. For example, the Ezra Pound archive includes both his own work and his translations of short stories by Paul Morand. The papers of the Pulitzer Prize winning poet W. D. Snodgrass include his translations of Christian Morgenstern from the German. The archives of many authors, recognized primarily for their own poetry or prose, include their translations of other writers.

Many literary translators are also published poets in their own right. In the case of some archives, that of Willis Barnstone for example, a prize-winning poet who has also translated

major works of poetry from various languages, it is difficult to say whether he or she would be listed "primarily" a poet or a translator.

To serve as an aid, the Library has prepared a special list of translation-related archives.

***AC: Are there any collections or areas of translation that the Lilly Library considers important and would like to hold?***

BM: One collection I would have loved to see at the Lilly Library is the highly important Tophoven archive, now in Straelen, Germany, with its primary emphasis on French-German translation. I knew Elmar Tophoven, who, along with Erika, was extremely kind to me many years ago, and even allowed me to sit in one day on his translation course at the Sorbonne. Erika's own role as a translator and now preserver of the archive has been praiseworthy, and her decision to retain the archive for easier access in Europe is entirely understandable. But we would have been honoured to have it at the Lilly.

In terms of new areas, we are interested in translation materials relating to lesser-known languages where little research material is as yet available, including many of the indigenous languages of the Americas, Africa and the Pacific Islands.

***AC: Which translators would you personally like to see better represented in the Lilly Library?***

BM: The Lilly's collection is strong, but the archives of additional important translators still abound, particularly when new literature is appearing, often along with new translators. For example, I'm personally impressed with the fine translations of Karl Ove Knausgaard into English by Don Barlett (a translator not previously known to me, through my own ignorance), and by extension, the whole question of what Norwegian literature is being translated into English, by whom and how.

Building collections is often a matter of serendipity, and driven in part by the emergence of new figures in world literature. When Orhan Pamuk won the Nobel Prize, my wife Lynda and I read his works for the first time. I contacted his translator Maureen Freely (out of the blue) about her papers and I visited her in London. I'd like to follow up with Pamuk's other translators into English to see if the full record of his reception in English-speaking countries can be preserved.

But these are only examples at random—there is so much to be saved.

***AC: How are the holdings processed and conserved?***

BM: The archives arrive at our Library in varying conditions, from carefully arranged and indexed files in firm cartons (for which we bless the translator), to boxes filled haphazardly with what appears to be translation-like material removed straight from some leaky

basement (for which we thank the translator, but withhold the blessing). At this point the processing begins. There are three major stages, and many archives reach the third stage only after a significant lapse of time.

#### Stage One: Preservation

1. First our conservation department opens and examines the material to ensure it contains no mould, insects, or other noxious items that might compromise our present holdings.
2. Once cleared by conservation, the material is transferred into archival folders (generally pre-used, but still offering archival protection) and archival boxes, retaining any order implied by the original arrangement.
3. The material is then accessioned in the form of a two-line description, including the donor or source of acquisition, the date of acquisition, its size in linear feet when boxed and an accession number.

#### Stage Two: Creating an Inventory

4. A member of library staff specializing in archival descriptions is assigned to work on an inventory of the material. He or she makes a preliminary assessment of what is going to be involved, then sets to work, rearranging the material in new folders and new boxes.
5. The inventory may be of two types: a) A general box-level inventory, which serves the temporary purpose of allowing us to know in more detail what we have and b) a detailed, full-level inventory following strict national guidelines that keep all libraries containing such material on the same path. The most important aspect of the detailed inventory for a potential researcher is the Content List, which gives a detailed description box by box of the material.

#### Stage Three: Accessibility for Research.

6. Completed inventories of the archives are available on-line through the Library's website. If no inventory is available, it means the processing is still in Stage Two. Researchers visiting the Library may view material by requesting it in the Reading Room. Use of the library is open to all—you simply sign up in the Reading Room with any standard I.D.. Scans of material may also be requested from abroad, although this is limited to individual items, not entire archives.

***AC: How does the Lilly Library judge the needs of researchers? Does this influence the choice of holdings, their organisation and description?***

BM: The library understands that its primary purpose, beyond preserving and cataloguing material, is making sure it's available to those who want to use it. If an archive appears likely to be of special interest to researchers, it is more likely to be acquired and to be processed more expeditiously. As interest in Genetic Translation Studies becomes more intense, for



example, the library may place more emphasis on creating the inventories for translator archives that are presently in the second stage of processing. The organisation and description of the archives remains the same for all collections and has been created with research scholars in mind.

***AC: Are there other archival resources in the Lilly Library that will be of benefit to translation researchers?***

BM: On a mundane, but often fascinating level, translators' archives reveal a great deal about the business of translation: contracts, book production, royalties and advertising. Translators' papers are filled with royalty statements, contracts and queries about payment. Although this material tells us little about the quality of the works involved, it does demonstrate the effect of material conditions on the publication and reception of foreign literature in the English-speaking world, including how often and, it must be said, how understandably, publishers' concerns about the bottom line influence their ultimate decisions.

The Lilly Library has strengthened research in this area by acquiring the papers of publishers who focus on international literature. The Calder and Boyar archives at the Lilly provide rich insights into the British editions of the major authors published by Éditions de Minuit, as well as a host of other internationally known European writers. The Lilly also houses the archives of smaller American presses such as Red Dust (publishers of the works of Robert Pinget in the U.S.), Catbird Press (the leading publisher for many years of Czech literature in English) and more recently Archipelago Books (the original American publishers of Karl Ove Knausgaard).

A second useful area for research in literary translation deals with the history of the translation profession. The archives of the ALTA (American Literary Translators Association) provide an insight into the early years in which literary translators in America finally decided to form their own national organisation, hold annual meetings and work to promote the recognition and value of their work. Scattered throughout other translation archives, material may be found on the formation of the PEN Translation Committee, the creation of several literary translation prizes, the establishment of various university programs teaching literary translation and the establishment of the Banff Center for translation in Canada.

***AC: What efforts does the Lilly Library make to promote translation research? Are there plans to digitise any of the holdings?***

BM: The Lilly Library, in cooperation with the Indiana University Institute for Advanced Studies, has hosted Literary Translation Seminars for several years, inviting noted translators from the U.S. and abroad to speak on their work. Several of these papers were published in a special issue of the *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* devoted to translation in 2010, and the seminars continue at least twice yearly.

The library has also devoted special exhibitions to the art and craft of literary translation in conjunction with national meetings of the ALTA, displaying drafts and correspondence between authors and translators.

The Lilly also provides Helm Fellowships for visiting scholars. Several Helm Fellows have already pursued research on topics ranging from the English versions of Umberto Eco's novels to Barbara Wright's work with Raymond Queneau.

Digitisation of Lilly material is a high priority, but as you might expect, it is a lengthy and expensive process, with initial emphasis on the most famous of the Lilly's holdings (including books). As of yet, no literary translation archive has been fully digitised, though many individual items have been scanned and provided to individual scholars.

**AC: How can one consult the translation archives of the Lilly Library?**

BM: The simplest way is to visit the Lilly Library's website and search for translation-related archives. Unfortunately (but also happily) the Lilly Library is undergoing a multi-million dollar renovation and the building itself will be closed through 2021. However, alternate space for consulting Lilly materials is being made available at our main library during the renovation, and the Lilly public services department will continue to answer queries.