

## “Un livre scandaleux et diffamatoire”: Militant Translations of the *Discours de la servitude volontaire*

Camilla Emmenegger, Francesco Gallino and Daniele Gorgone

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Article abstract

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# “Un livre scandaleux et diffamatoire”: Militant Translations of the *Discours de la servitude volontaire*

Camilla Emmenegger

*University of Florence*

Francesco Gallino

*University of Turin*

Daniele Gorgone

*Independent scholar*

## Abstract

The *Discours de la servitude volontaire* boasts a long tradition of militant translations. We argue that these translations—whose introductions and paratextual materials often aim to enlist La Boétie to a specific political cause or ideology—must be taken into account when analyzing the *Discours*' political content. As Miguel Abensour (2006) pointed out, the *Discours*' elusive complexity fulfills a performative function, whose goal is to reveal the reader's conception of freedom. It can be compared to a gamebook, in which most translators, editors and/or commentators get involved when publishing the text: they make particular interpretative choices and offer their specific reading of La Boétie's thesis. In order to illustrate this peculiar interpretative dynamic, we briefly examine three case studies: an Italian (1944), an American (1942) and a Soviet (1952) translation. All three contain a strong political message and, we suggest, each of these messages brings to light a new path through La Boétie's gamebook, developing a new vision of his intentionally paradoxical political theory.

**Keywords:** voluntary servitude, La Boétie, history of translations, freedom, Harry Kurz

## Résumé

Le *Discours de la servitude volontaire* a une longue tradition de traductions militantes. Nous soutenons que ces traductions – dont les introductions et les documents paratextuels visent souvent à associer La Boétie à une cause ou une idéologie politique spécifique – doivent être prises en compte lors d’une analyse du contenu politique du *Discours*. Comme le souligne Miguel Abensour (2006), la complexité insaisissable du *Discours* répond à une fonction performative, dont le but est de révéler la conception de liberté du lecteur. Elle peut être comparée à un livre-jeu, dans lequel la plupart des traducteurs, éditeurs et/ou commentateurs s’impliquent en publiant le texte : ils font leurs choix et proposent leur lecture spécifique de la thèse de La Boétie. Afin de donner un aperçu de cette dynamique interprétative particulière, nous examinons brièvement trois études de cas : une traduction italienne (1944), une traduction américaine (1942) et une traduction soviétique (1952). Toutes les trois véhiculent un message politique fort. Nous avançons que chacun de ces messages met en lumière une nouvelle piste dans le livre-jeu de La Boétie, en développant une nouvelle virtualité de sa théorie politique volontairement paradoxale.

**Mots-clés** : servitude volontaire, La Boétie, histoire des traductions, liberté, Harry Kurz

## Introduction

Étienne de La Boétie’s *Discours de la servitude volontaire*<sup>1</sup> has been elusive ever since it appeared.<sup>2</sup> Written by a young aristocrat from Sarlat (Périgord) when he was in his late teens, it remained unpublished and started circulating as a manuscript among the most eminent intellectuals of the Bordeaux region. Montaigne reports that his first encounter with La Boétie occurred while reading the *Discours*. After their intense relationship<sup>3</sup> was interrupted by La Boétie’s early death in 1563, Montaigne devoted himself to celebrating his friend’s genius by composing a “frame” (see Stierle, 2008) in which to publish the *Discours*. He named this “frame” *Essais*, and the *Discours* was to have occupied a central position in Book I, immediately after chapter 28 dedicated to La Boétie and significantly entitled “De l’amitié.” In the end, this was not the case: chapter 29 was left blank, an eloquent

1. Montaigne gives us two dates of composition, 1546 and 1548. In any case, it is now agreed that La Boétie updated the work around the middle of the 1550s (O’Brien and Schachter, 2019, pp. 74-75).

2. The editorial history of the *Discours de la servitude volontaire* is examined in detail in Panichi (2008). For its theoretical implications, see Gerbier and Guerrier (2012). On “voluntary servitude” in literature, see Ceretta (2019, pp. 53-70).

3. On the relationship between La Boétie and Montaigne, see Schachter (2008).

void at the center of 16<sup>th</sup>-century France's most celebrated literary and philosophical work.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the *Discours* had been stolen. Huguenots had seized it and published it as an insurrectionary pamphlet in the second edition of Goulart's *Mémoires de l'estat de France sous Charles Neufiesme*, a volume which was burnt by the authorities in Bordeaux in 1579. La Boétie's work therefore began a two century-long undercover existence, during which it became "the most crypto-quoted text in the history of political thought,"<sup>5</sup> influencing Hobbes and Rousseau (Santi, 2013; Emmenegger *et al.*, 2013; Munnich, 2016), and famously being read by Cardinal Richelieu.

Eventually, the *Discours* reappeared in the 1727 edition of Montaigne's *Essais* edited by Pierre Coste. Its influence soon spread: Vittorio Alfieri's *Della tirannide [Of Tyranny]* (1777) and Jean-Paul Marat's *Chains of Slavery* (1774) appear to be directly inspired by the *Discours* (Negri, 1919; Panichi, 2008, pp. 13, 33-35 and 49-51), while since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century a growing number of essays have been devoted to La Boétie (Panichi, 2008). More importantly, the *Discours* would seem to undergo a form of "bradyseism":<sup>6</sup> it has periodically disappeared from public debate, only to resurface in moments of social crisis. New editions were published in France during the July Revolution, the 1848 insurrections, and the period of the Commune, while something similar took place with translations. German Jacobins published a translation of the *Discours* in 1793, and an Italian edition appeared during the period of the Parthenopean Republic in 1799. Since then, numerous "militant" translations of La Boétie have appeared, from Gustave Landauer's 1910-1911 version (La Boétie, 1910-1911) to the 2000 Arab translation by Ġawdat Sa'íd, which was among the texts that inspired the non-violent Syrian movement Daraya Youth in 2011 (La Boétie, 2000). Most of these translations included an introduction aimed both at offering an interpretation of La Boétie's *Discours* and at linking its theses to

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4. See Montaigne (1588). On Montaigne and La Boétie, see also Lefèvre (2007); Geiger and Monnin (2011). On the concept of friendship in La Boétie and Montaigne, see Geonget and Gerbier (2012).

5. We take this definition from Raffaele Laudani, who discussed it during his seminar "Nova Totius Terrarum Orbis," Bologna-Duke Summer School in Global Studies and Critical Theory, Bologna, 24-27 June 2014.

6. The gradual uplift/descent of part of the Earth's surface, mostly caused by hydrothermal activity.

a specific political context. Overall, they have offered a diverse range of interpretations, enrolling La Boétie as a pacifist, a libertarian, a Marxist, an anarchist, a devoted Catholic, an anti-Nazi, a democratic thinker, and much more. Almost all of these interpretations have some grounding in the text due, as we shall demonstrate, to the *Discours's* net-like inner structure.

### A Never-Ending Story

La Boétie's *Discours* is a very short work, around 30 to 40 pages long. Its language is clear and its arguments, marked by many examples and anecdotes, are entirely comprehensible. At first glance, therefore, it might seem an easy, straightforward pamphlet. However, this is not the case. On closer examination, La Boétie's supposedly linear reasoning reveals an unexpectedly complicated web, with different and even contradictory threads implicitly intertwined.

This elusive complexity is the key to understanding the variety of readings and uses to which different editions of the *Discours* have given rise, from a textbook of peaceful civic commitment to an exhortation to tyrannicide. La Boétie's work functions, in other words, as a sort of *ante-litteram* gamebook and escape room. Like a gamebook, it constantly confronts readers with traps and crossroads, implicitly challenging them to choose their own path—a path which, in turn, will reveal something of the reader's instincts and views.<sup>7</sup> And like an “escape room,” it confronts the reader with an apparently unsolvable puzzle: how can servitude be both something extremely painful and something deliberately chosen by serfs?

La Boétie's brief work states a paradox: tyranny rests on the inexplicable support of the oppressed. However, the text is meticulously structured in order not to give the reader a way out. Looking at the French, subdued and oppressed by their tyrant, the author wonders how it is possible that one single man can succeed in subjugating millions of people. It is certainly not by his own strength, as he is nothing more than a man. Rather, it is because the subjugated themselves provide him with support. The shocking evidence consists in the fact that, though they may be raped, killed, robbed, and

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7. A similar reading has been developed more extensively by Laurent Gerbier: “le lecteur n'est pas seulement le récepteur du texte, il en est aussi une des figures: de cela seul qu'il lit et qu'il comprend il tire sa place et son rôle tels que le texte les lui assigne” (2015, pp. 347).

humiliated, subjects continue to grant their support to the tyrant, *de facto* constantly recreating the power that oppresses them:

D'où a il pris tant d'yeulx dont il vous espie, si vous ne les luy baillés?  
Comment a il tant de mains pour vous fraper, s'il ne les prend de  
vous? Les pieds dont il foule vos cites, d'où les a il s'ils ne sont des  
vostres? Comment a il aucun pouvoir sur vous, que par vous? [...] Que  
vous pourroit il faire, si vous n'estiés receleurs du larron qui vous pille,  
complices du meurtrier qui vous tue, et traistres a vous mesmes? (La  
Boétie, 2002, pp. 138-139)

However, unlike most “escape rooms,” the *Discours* does not provide the reader with a key to solve the paradox, and this is where its disturbing power mainly resides. After setting up its two contrasting aspects—painfulness and voluntariness—La Boétie refuses to choose between them, either by legitimizing serfdom (because of the subjects’ willing acceptance of it) or by claiming to make people aware of their situation (as he might do if he obliterated voluntariness and only focused on painfulness). The paradox remains unsolved, and it challenges the reader to bear this openness, avoid shortcuts, and embrace the constantly precarious nature of human freedom. In La Boétie’s terms, liberation can only happen as self-emancipation, which is why—as Miguel Abensour astutely pointed out—he conceives of the *Discours* itself, the *experience* of reading it, as a possible emancipatory practice, the solution to the “escape room” being not to take the easiest way out:

Comme si le *Discours de la servitude volontaire* était, dans sa texture même, la mise à l'épreuve du désir de liberté du lecteur, de chacun des tous uns. Comme si la recherche de la liberté se fortifiait de la capacité à déjouer les pièges du texte, ce faisant à résister au désir de servitude qu'ils recèlent. (Abensour, 2006, p. 84)

An example might be useful here. One of the most insidious “traps” set up by La Boétie takes place when he discusses the “Lycurgus experiment.” Halfway through the text, the author identifies habit as the “first cause” of voluntary servitude. To prove this, he tells the story of how Sparta’s legendary lawgiver, Lycurgus, demonstrated the tremendous power of habit by bringing his twin dogs up in two completely different ways:

Lycurge le policeur de Sparte, avoit nourri ce dit on deux chiens tous  
deus freres, tous deus allaités de mesme laict, l'un engraisié en la cuisine,  
l'autre accoustumé par les champs au son de la trompe et du huchet,

voulant monstrer au peuple lacedemonien que les hommes sont tels que la nourriture les fait, mit les deus chiens en plain marché, et entr'eus una soupe et un lievre; l'un courut au plat et l'autre au lievre; toutesfois, dit il, si sont ils freres. (2002, p. 150)

When confronted with this anecdote, readers can choose to interpret Lycurgus's words as the actual message of the *Discours* and embrace a way of thinking which legitimizes power by describing human nature as passive and fully malleable. Or, following Abensour's interpretation, they can latch on to the fact that in this passage La Boétie—who deprecates tyrants throughout the text—has just given a speech to a tyrant: they can therefore suspect that Lycurgus's position may not coincide with La Boétie's. They can then go through the text again, in search of clues of a different, more multi-faceted conception of human nature.

This *performative* nature of La Boétie's work must be kept in mind while approaching the history of its translations (Donaggio, 2014). Of course, as far as political works are concerned, no translation can be described as “neutral,” but the case of the *Discours* is particularly telling. In fact, most non-French editions *claim* not to be merely philological: they aim to act on their world, and they explicitly conceive of La Boétie's *Discours* as a tool to achieve this goal. This means that by publishing the work, most translators, editors, and/or commentators get involved in the “gamebook”: they make their choices, choose a path, and offer their specific readings of La Boétie's message.

This is why translations of the *Discours* cannot be studied without taking into account the insidiousness of La Boétie's thinking. And, symmetrically, the *Discours* itself cannot be fully separated from the interpretative reactions it has given rise to throughout the centuries, as each of them brings to light a new perspective; each is a new path through the gamebook, or a new failed attempt to escape from the room.

To explore this interpretative history, we will briefly examine three case studies: an Italian (1944), an American (1942), and a Soviet (1952) translation. All three contain a strong political message. The Italian translation is marked by the ambiguities of post-Fascist society. Its two introductions (1943 and 1944) show the naiveté of many Italian intellectuals at the time of the fall of Mussolini (1943) and their sudden political awakening due to the partisan struggle

against the Nazi-Fascists (1944). The U.S. edition (January 1942) is explicitly conceived as a source of legitimation for the American intervention in the Second World War. However, the editor Harry Kurz attempts to moderate the subversive potential of the *Discours* by describing La Boétie as a Catholic liberal and a pacifist. Despite being philologically acceptable (the American philosopher Thoreau, for instance, was influenced by La Boétie in developing his theory of passive resistance), Kurz's cautious interpretation obviously clashes with the bellicose purposes of his edition. Finally, by closely analyzing La Boétie's political philosophy, the 1952 Soviet translation by the persecuted Russian scholar Faina Kogan-Bernshtejn constitutes a brilliant implicit critique of the Stalinist regime.

Some of the militant implications of these translations can be found in their paratextual material (Batchelor, 2018), on which our analysis will focus. Indeed, in both the Italian edition (which includes two opposing introductions) and the American one (which uses marginal notes to suggest a specific interpretation of single passages), but partly also in the Russian version (with its enormous introductory apparatus), the "manipulation" (Lefevere, 1992) carried out by the editors is particularly significant in the paratexts. While translation choices are also revealing, they will not be considered here, with the exception of the following example, which has been the object of much attention.

The Henri de Mesmes's manuscript edition of the *Discours* offers many interpretative and translation puzzles.<sup>8</sup> Among these, the most interesting is perhaps the expression "tous uns." La Boétie's coinage has proved a touchstone of commentators' and translators' political intentions. As will be seen in our conclusion, the phrase "tous uns" indicates a particular type of political collectivity in which the social bond ("tous") is capable of preserving the specificity of each of its members ("uns"), thus marking a stark contrast to the kind of society born out of voluntary servitude in which the social bond is founded on obedience to the One and individuality is therefore lost. In numerous French editions and many translations, this expression, which constitutes a real innovation in political theory, has not always been fully understood. For instance, Charles Teste's 1836 modern French version of the *Discours* renders "tous uns" as "un seul être" (see

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8. For an exhaustive reconstruction of the various manuscripts of the *Discours* (the original has been lost), see Balsamo and Knop (2014).



La Boétie, 2002, p. 205). Another extreme case, significant for its political implications, can be found in an article published in 1847 by Pierre Leroux in *Revue Sociale*, who emends “tous uns” into “tous un,” while decrying the absence of a *pars construens* in La Boétie’s work (see Leroux, 1847). Similarly, in Harry Kurz’s translation, based on the de Mesmes edition and which we shall address below, the phrase “tous uns” is translated as “one organic whole” (La Boétie, 1942, p. 14). Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, an analysis of the ways in which key expressions used by La Boétie have been translated would reveal specific ways in which his concepts have been interpreted.

### The 1944 Italian “Double” Edition

The *Discours* intersected the history of Italian Fascism both at the beginning and at the very end of the *Ventennio* [Mussolini’s twenty-year dictatorship]. The first of these intersections was actually a missed meeting. In 1924, the architect and essayist Edoardo Persico wrote to the Italian liberal intellectual and editor Piero Gobetti (who was to die two years later at the age of 25 in exile in Paris after being beaten up by Fascist thugs) and proposed that they publish a new Italian translation of the *Discours*. If published, it would have been the third Italian translation of the *Discours*, the earlier ones being a limited run Neapolitan edition published in 1799 by the revolutionary government of the Parthenopean Republic in order to “educate” the people to liberty; and the erroneously entitled *Prima edizione italiana* published in Milan by Daelli in 1864 and translated by Pietro Fanfani. Gobetti’s reply has been lost, but it was probably rejected as the idea was not taken forward. In the same letter, Persico claimed to have already translated the whole text. However, no trace of this work has been found in his archive—which it is now impossible to visit due to a series of highly controversial events<sup>9</sup>—and some scholars even doubt it was ever composed (D’Orsi, 1990).

As this opportunity was missed, a true antifascist Italian edition of La Boétie’s work had to wait until the end of the dictatorship. In

9. The Archivio Persico was given by Ada Gobetti (Piero Gobetti’s wife) and Giulia Veronese (who had edited Persico’s collected works in 1964) to the Fondazione Feltrinelli in Milan. In 1977, the Fondazione Feltrinelli entrusted it (along with the Archivio Giuseppe Pagano) to a private Italian citizen living in Switzerland, who has consistently refused to give it back. See *Appello per gli archivi Giuseppe Pagano ed Edoardo Persico promosso dall’ANED* (Associazione Nazionale ex deportati nei campi nazisti), [http://www.deportati.it/news/pagano\\_appello](http://www.deportati.it/news/pagano_appello).

1944, the old 1864 Italian translation was republished by Florentine editor Le Monnier (“In ventiquattresimo” series) under the supervision of Pietro Pancrazi, an Italian antifascist and literary critic who was also one of the two directors of the series (the other being the illustrious jurist Piero Calamandrei, who would subsequently publish an enthusiastic review of the *Discours* (Calamandrei, 1945)).

After graduating in Classical studies, Pietro Pancrazi had become a literary critic for the Milan newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. Despite not enrolling in the Fascist Party (a rare and brave choice at the time), he was not an active antifascist, rather expressing his aversion for Fascism by “*ignorandolo nei suoi scritti* [ignoring it in his writings<sup>10</sup>]” (Calamandrei, 1953, p. 476). As reported by his friend Calamandrei, the Italian persecution of Jews (which officially started in 1938 with the promulgation of the racial laws) and Italy’s entry into the war changed all this, turning Pancrazi into “*un militante pronto a tutti i rischi della lotta clandestina* [a militant who was ready to take the risks of guerilla warfare]” (*ibid.*) who hid Jewish friends and colleagues in his house and actively fought in the Italian resistance movement (Fiucci, 2020, p. 127).

It is no coincidence, then, that the Le Monnier edition opens with this touching dedication: “*A Leone Ginzburg, morto per la libertà nelle carceri di Regina Coeli il 5 febbraio 1944* [To Leone Ginzburg, who died for freedom in the Regina Coeli prison on 5 February 1944].”<sup>11</sup> More remarkably, this edition contains two different introductions. The first dates from August 1943, the year in which the Le Monnier edition was initially meant to be published. It was composed during the “forty-five days,” the period between the fall of the Fascist regime in Italy (25 July 1943) and the announcement of the Armistice of Cassibile (8 September 1943), which immediately led to the Nazi occupation of Northern Italy. While writing this introduction, Pancrazi believed Italy had left Fascism behind, and his optimism is reflected in the text. On the one hand, he blames Italians for the “voluntary servitude” they showed under the regime:

Ma gli esperti italiani d’oggi troveranno nell’operetta altri avvertimenti ed esempi di una a loro più immediata realtà; e così calzanti, che si direbbero ricavati dall’osservazione diretta della nostra vita di ieri. [...]

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10. Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations are ours.

11. Leone Ginzburg—translator, journalist, antifascist—is considered one of the most influential Italian intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See D’Orsi (2019).

non [è] male che gli italiani del 1943 leggano certe pagine del *Contr'uno* almeno due volte. (Pancrazi, 1944, p. 33)

[But today's Italian experts will find in this small work warnings and examples of a reality closer to home; and such fitting ones that one would think they had been drawn from direct observation of our own recent past. [...] The Italians of 1943 could do worse than to read certain pages of [La Boétie's *Discours*] at least twice.]

On the other hand, he expresses a genuine enthusiasm for Italy's renewed freedom:

Dopo vent'anni della più balorda e avvilente soggezione ad *uno* che la storia d'Italia ricordi, la triste sorte ha messo oggi noi in condizione di dover leggere il *Contr'uno* con l'animo di chi qualcosa ha già recuperate, ma più ancora gli spetta recuperare della perduta libertà. (*ibid.*, p. 21)

[After twenty years of the maddest and most dismal subjection to One to be found in Italian history, our sad fate has put us in the position of having to read [La Boétie's *Discours*] in the state of mind of people who, though they have already regained some of their lost liberty, still have to regain most of it.]

The first introduction focuses on the parts of La Boétie's text which concern the instruments through which, technically speaking, the tyrant maintains his power. This happens thanks to the minions who, like so many little tyrants, give birth to a hierarchical pyramid of oppression, with a person on each step who consents to obey the person above him in order to be allowed, in exchange, to dominate those who lie below him. Pancrazi stresses the resemblance between La Boétie's pyramid and "*la gran matassa dei gerarchi* [the mass of party leaders]" and bitterly remarks that "*è malinconico pensare che questa genealogia o storia dei gerarchi, che sembra ricalcata sulla nostra vita di ieri, fu così puntualmente descritta quattrocento anni fa* [it is a melancholy thought that this genealogy or history of Fascist leaders, which seems modelled on our recent past, was described so precisely four hundred years ago]" (*ibid.*, p. 38).

If things had gone as planned, that is, if the *Discours* and its first introduction had been published in the autumn of 1943, the Le Monnier edition would not have been very interesting. It would have ended up among the "civic textbooks," like the Neapolitan edition of 1799. But of course things went differently. Northern Italy became a Nazi-Fascist puppet state, and an entire generation of young

Italian men and women had to choose between collusion and armed resistance. Freedom was to be paid for with blood: this awareness dominates the second introduction of the Le Monnier edition, which dates from August 1944.

In this second text, Pancrazi himself criticizes his previous naivety: “*Oggi siamo tutti più consapevoli che la libertà, che quasi sembrava essere un facile regalo, quando sarà, sarà soltanto una lunga, penosa e sanguinosa conquista* [We are now aware that freedom, which had almost seemed an easy gift, will only be a long, painful, bloody conquest]” (*ibid.*, p. 42). The tragic experience of war and resistance dramatically changed Pancrazi’s perspective. But it also helped the Le Monnier edition to shift from the ordinary “civic” reading of La Boétie to a more stimulating interpretation.

According to Miguel Abensour’s view, La Boétie’s *Discours* mixes three different “discourses”: the “tyrant’s discourse,” of which the “Lycurgus experiment” offers a typical example; the “tribune’s discourse” (at the point where La Boétie refers to “pauvres et miserable peuples” near the beginning of the treatise), in which a hypothetical leader claims to be freeing the people in order to secretly take control over them; and the “philosopher’s discourse,” which suggests that a real exit from voluntary servitude can only come from a practice of self-emancipation (2006, p. 80). If we adopt Abensour’s three categories for the purpose of the present analysis, we can describe the double Le Monnier introduction as a shift from the “tribune’s” discourse to the “philosopher’s.” Freedom—in La Boétie’s perspective, as in Pancrazi’s painful discovery in 1944—is not to be given but to be taken. And rather than blaming others as “serfs,” La Boétie’s readers should be prepared for a long fight against their own dormant desire for domination, since, in Marcel Gauchet’s words, “[la servitude] habite encore le moment de la révolte” (Abensour and Gauchet, 2002, p. 30).

### **The American Wartime Edition**

One more intersection between Italian antifascism and La Boétie should be mentioned. Unlike Persico’s lost translation and the Le Monnier 1943-1944 edition, this intersection did not take place in Italy. Its protagonist, the scholar and writer Antonio Borgese, was in exile in the United States due to his political militancy. Here, in 1937, he published his most successful book, *Goliath. The March of Fascism*. The work aimed to criticize Fascism “by placing it in a long-range historical setting” (Woolbert, 1938, p. 363), thus suggesting

the existence of a long-lasting Italian weakness for totalitarianism (the “Italian disease”) embodied by figures such as Dante, Cola di Rienzo, and Machiavelli, of which Mussolini’s Fascism was only one (atrocious) symptom.

In the conclusion to *Goliath*, which was presented as an invocation (“As for our brothers in Italy”), Borgese briefly evoked Étienne de La Boétie’s *Discours*: “The truth which was to shine so clearly shortly afterwards to the juvenile Anti-Machiavel of France, La Boétie: that all servitude is voluntary and the slave is more despicable than the tyrant is hateful” (p. 479). Borgese’s comment echoed a well-established Italian interpretative tradition. The idea that the *Discours* blamed serfs rather than tyrants was expressed in the introduction to the 1864 Italian edition (“La servitù volontaria *porta nel suo titolo la condanna più dei servi che dei tiranni* [The title *Voluntary servitude* blames serfs more than it does tyrants]” (La Boétie, 1864, p. x), while the definition of La Boétie as “anti-Machiavel” had been widely discussed among Italian scholars.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as *Goliath* quickly became a best-seller and significantly influenced anglophone readings of Fascism, Borgese’s Laboetian aphorism, too, gained a certain celebrity. Harry Kurz was among those who were intrigued by it.

A Queens College scholar and a specialist in modern French literature, Kurz became interested in La Boétie after reading *Goliath*. His first article on La Boétie (which was a peroration on the importance of French studies in the curricula of U.S. high schools) was published in 1939. In the following years, he continued working on the *Discours*, focusing specifically on the human and intellectual relationship between its author and Michel de Montaigne (Kurz, 1946). More importantly, in January 1942, a few weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he edited a new and explicitly anti-Nazi<sup>13</sup> English edition of the *Discours*, which he suitably titled *The Anti-Dictator*.

In his editor’s introduction, in which he begins by quoting the aphorism of “the exiled Borgese,” Kurz looks at La Boétie’s work from an all-round perspective. He provides a short biographical

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12. See Negri (1919).

13. The book is dedicated to “people in all totalitarian countries”; Nazism is directly addressed on pp. 35, 36 and 37; the other “totalitarian” countries mentioned by Kurz are Italy and, indirectly, Spain.

introduction to La Boétie, analyzing his friendship with Montaigne in detail, followed by a discussion on what he calls the “curious history” of the *Discours*. On this point, he fully embraces Montaigne’s condemnation of the Huguenots’ appropriations of La Boétie’s work,<sup>14</sup> and drily states that “La Boétie was very far from imagining when he composed his classical *Discourse* that it would transform its author ten years after his death into a champion of Huguenot resistance” (1942, p. xvii).

The insistence on La Boétie’s repugnance for seditiousness is probably the most remarkable point of Kurz’s introduction. His reading of La Boétie’s paradox, although it does not contradict the text, significantly stresses its *non-violent* character: “[I]ts simple assumption is that real power always lies in the hands of the people and that they can free themselves from a despot by an act of will unaccompanied by any gesture of violence” (*ibid.*, p. ix).

La Boétie’s peaceful attitude is also mentioned by Kurz regarding his work as a magistrate (“[he was renowned as] a specialist in arranging compromise between religious factions” (*ibid.*, p. xi)), while his political compliancy is stressed in the conclusion: “The truth is that he was not a rebel. [...] La Boétie [...] shows serenely the way to [the tyrant’s] overthrow by patience, passive resistance, and faith in God” (*ibid.*, p. xxi). This sharp neutralization of La Boétie’s political contentiousness, combined with an insistence on the religious theme that is not supported by the text, consistently emerges from all of Kurz’s writings on the *Discours*. In his 1950 article, for instance, he focuses on La Boétie’s supposed second political work, *On the Edict of January* (whose authorship is today highly debated (see Cocula, 1995, p. 122; Tournon, 2014)), a highly conservative work, and he even states that “he is not a revolutionist. [...] La Boétie is heart and soul a Catholic and a royalist” (1950, p. 512). However, Kurz’s frequent statements on La Boétie’s pacifism strangely contrast with the very scope of the *Anti-Dictator*, which openly defends U.S. military intervention in Europe. What might appear as a contradiction—La Boétie described as both a champion of pacifism and a supporter of the anti-Nazi war—is managed by adopting the “serf-blaming” perspective we have already encountered in Borgese and in the 1943

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14. “Parce que j’ay trouvé que cet ouvrage a esté depuis mis en lumiere, et à mauvaise fin, par ceux qui cherchent à troubler et changer l’estat de nostre police, [...] je me suis dédit de le loger icy.” (Montaigne, 1588, p. 194).

Le Monnier introduction. It was precisely *because* Europeans had failed to read and understand La Boétie, he argues, that military force was required:

It is not too much to assert that, if this four hundred-year-old essay could be placed in the hands of the oppressed peoples of our day, they would find a sure way to a rebirth of freedom, a manifestation of a new spirit that would almost automatically obliterate the obscurantist strutters who today throttle their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. (1942, pp. xxi-xxii)

The introduction to the *Anti-Dictator* is only one of its remarkable paratextual features. Kurz also provided his translation of the *Discours* with two different sets of editor's notes. The footnotes play a fairly traditional role: they either track down the unmentioned sources of La Boétie's references to Greek and Roman history, such as Plutarch and Suetonius, or clarify some details (who is Erichthonius? what is the French kings' sacred vessel?) that were obvious to 16<sup>th</sup>-century French readers but might be obscure to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Americans.

Kurz's marginal notes, on the other hand, seem unusual. There are fifty-five of them, all printed in italics; they have the form of very brief comments and are laid out alongside La Boétie's main text, which is fifty-four pages long. It has been suggested that, as "marginal interpolations," they express the fact that "Kurz found the essay topical for the times" (Keohane, 1977, p. 123). This interpretation is probably reductive: their scope is much more ambitious. Kurz aims to guide the reader towards a specific interpretation of La Boétie's text. For this purpose, he appends a short comment to the text's most significant paragraphs, some of which merely resume or clarify La Boétie's thesis. For instance, where La Boétie rejects the traditional philosophical distinction between legitimate and illegitimate political power (La Boétie, 2002, pp. 127-128 and 145-146), Kurz writes: "*Many kinds of dictators, but no preferences among them*" (1942, p. 17; italics in the original).<sup>15</sup> However, most of his interpolations are not (and do not claim to be) impartial. On the one hand, some of them try to connect the *Discours* to late modern political schemes, such as

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15. Kurz's comment relates to the following passage: "Il y a trois sortes de tirans, les uns ont le royaume par election du people; les autres par la force des armes; les autres par succession [...]. Ainsi pour en dire la verité, je voi bien qu'il y a entr'eus quelque différence; mais de chois je ni en vois point, et estant les moiens de venir aus regnes divers, tousjours la façon de regner est quasi semblable" (La Boétie, 2002, pp. 145-146).

“*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*” (*ibid.*, p. 13) or “*Can democracy prevail?*” (*ibid.*, p. 7). On the other hand, the majority are explicitly meant to underline the applicability of La Boétie’s work to the context of the Second World War. When commenting on an excerpt about the formerly republican Venetian state falling under the domination of the Doge, for instance, Kurz writes: “*Or, the Italians of 1914 / Or, il Duce of 1941*” (*ibid.*, p. 21). Such a comment may seem to imply a generic antifascist usage of La Boétie, as for Borgese, but in fact, Kurz’s goal is to back the Allies’ efforts against the Axis. This aim becomes clear when Kurz comments on La Boétie’s discussion of the role of images and symbols of the power of tyrants: “*Swastikas, rising suns, fasces*” (*ibid.*, p. 36). In short, by publishing La Boétie’s work in 1942, Kurz did not simply “read it as an antitotalitarian essay”; he meant it as a real wartime edition of the *Discours*.<sup>16</sup>

One last issue needs to be considered briefly. It is a long-lasting interpretative *cliché* that La Boétie’s editions and translations tend to flourish in critical times: “là où creuse la vieille taupe, retentit, bien ou mal, le nom de La Boétie” (Abensour and Gauchet 2002, p. 15). The French editions of 1835 (Félicité de Lamennais), 1847 (Pierre Leroux), and 1863 (Auguste de Vermorel), as well as Jean-Paul Marat’s “Laboetian” work *The Chains of Slavery* (1774), are usually mentioned as evidence (Panichi, 2008, pp. 33-35 and 49-51). It may therefore seem natural to read the *Anti-Dictator* in light of this remarkable history of editorial underground existence. However, such an interpretation may turn out to be misleading. In fact, the decision to publish the *Anti-Dictator* might be the result, rather than further evidence, of this legendary story, and Kurz himself proves he is aware of it: “[The work] has appeared twice in Italian and in French many times at peculiar dates, 1789, 1835, 1845, 1863—in periods marked by agitation preceding popular revolt” (1942, p. xviii). By referring to La Boétie’s peculiar editorial history, Kurz obviously conceives his “anti-Nazi” edition as another such occurrence.<sup>17</sup> It should be remembered, then, that while the historical significance of the unusually high number of editions of the *Discours* is undeniable, its historic “timeliness” is, at some level, a self-fulfilling prophecy,

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16. “Harry Kurz read it as an antitotalitarian essay; for example, when he ‘rendered’ it into English in 1942, he emphasized its overt challenge to Hitler by the title he gave it, ‘Anti-Dictator’” (Atkinson, 2012, p. lii).

17. See the *New York Times* review of the *Anti-Dictator*: “An anti-Nazi of 1548” (Anon., 1942).



which, like its theoretical paradox, we can neither dismiss nor fully embrace.<sup>18</sup>

### The Soviet “Oblique” Edition

The third mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century edition of the *Discours* we would like to discuss is a Russian translation published in the Soviet Union in 1952. Its updated literature review and rich paratextual materials—which include a comparison between the Russian translation and the original French, passages from Montaigne’s *Essais* as well as from the 1574 Huguenot pamphlet *Réveille-matin des François*, texts both by and about Lev Tolstoy, himself a keen La Boétie reader, together with a brilliant and extensive editor’s introduction—make it the most complete edition of the *Discours* ever published, and the best edition available until the 1976 Payot French edition.

Russian historian Faina Kogan-Bernshtejn was no average editor. She was born in 1899 in what is today Estonia. When she was sixteen years old, she was adopted by the famous revolutionary Natalya Osipovna Kogan-Bernshtejn, and in 1917 she married her son, the Social-Revolutionary party member Matvej L’vovich, who a few months later was killed by Bolsheviks.<sup>19</sup> She then moved to Moscow and started teaching medieval history at Moscow State University (where she is reported to have supervised Svetlana Stalina’s dissertation on Machiavelli). However, in 1949, she was fired during the campaign against cosmopolitanism led by the then Secretary of the Central Committee, Andrei Zhdanov. She moved to the small provincial city of Voronezh, in south-western Russia, where she prepared three major critical editions: La Boétie’s *Discours*, Montaigne’s *Essais*, and Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*. She was finally re-admitted to her Moscow University position in 1956.

When she published her edition of the *Discours* in 1952, Kogan-Bernshtejn was therefore a target of Stalin’s totalitarian persecution. This condition most likely influenced her choice to take on a classic

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18. Kurz’s translation was republished in 1975 by the Ludwig Von Mises Institute. A notice from the publisher warned that the “side notes” [*sic*] in the original translation had been removed, although Kurz’s footnotes (which are almost always concerned with explaining the historical references) remained. The new edition’s title was *The Politics of Obedience*. The introduction by Murray Rothbard is itself of importance for a libertarian, anti-State view of La Boétie’s treatise (see La Boétie, 1975).

19. The circumstances of his death are not clear: it is possible he was killed by mistake by Soviet troops (see Jushkevich, 2004, pp. 8-56).

of anti-autocratic political literature. Kogan-Bernshtejn herself describes La Boétie's as "one of the most important works in human literature,"<sup>20</sup> conferring it a universal significance (1952, p. 59).

On an interpretative level, the editor's introduction puts forward an innovative reading of the text. Kogan-Bernshtejn argues that the *Discours* is composed of two very different parts. The first contains a coherent expression of the main theoretical hypothesis: voluntary servitude. As Kogan-Bernshtejn sums up, this refers to the idea

that it is the people who voluntarily entrust power over themselves to one man; that it is the people who submit themselves to servitude, where to achieve freedom, the supreme among goods, there is no need for any particular effort, no particular courage, it is sufficient only to want it. (*ibid.*, p. 74)

In turn, the second part of the *Discours* suggests, in Kogan-Bernshtejn's view, a conflicting idea: societies feature a structure which is both pyramidal and hierarchical, whose rigorous mechanism—firmly blocking individuals from the lower classes in their own place—leaves no space for such thing as a "voluntary" servitude: none of the "serfs" could set themselves free by simply resolving to serve no more ("Soiés resolut de ne servir plus, et vous voila libres" (La Boétie, 2002, p. 139)), as the first half of the *Discours* recommended.

Cogent as it may be, Kogan-Bernshtejn's interpretation is not merely exegetical. By highlighting the devious, bureaucratic nature of La Boétie's "second" autocratic society, she is quite obviously suggesting a comparison with Stalin's Soviet Union, a country in which coercion is too ubiquitous to allow citizens to set themselves free from servitude. Of course, Kogan-Bernshtejn does not explicitly mention the USSR. She just hints briefly, but significantly, at "the bureaucratic apparatus of the centralized state" (1952, p. 81). However, we have an important clue to her critical intention. While analyzing the *Discours'* rhetorical style, she refers to La Boétie's way of communicating his own message, which she qualifies as an "Aesopian language" (*ibid.*, p. 75).<sup>21</sup> For example, she shows how La Boétie explicitly excludes

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20. Excerpts from the Russian text have been kindly translated by Daniela Steila, to whom—more generally—we are thankful for helping us with the analysis of Kogan-Bernshtejn's edition.

21. Aesop, as a slave, could not show in a direct and open way the defects of his masters, whose figures, therefore, he replaced with those of animals with corresponding moral and behavioral characteristics. The "Aesopian language," then, is a way of communicating that makes conscious use of certain rhetorical and expressive devices

French kings from his criticism, but does so, she argues, in a way that is too “forced and ambiguous” (*ibid.*, p. 78) to really believe him. Thus, she invites readers to read between the lines, showing that La Boétie criticizes the tyrants of his own age by employing an oblique style, thereby secretly setting up a multi-level text which readers have to decode.<sup>22</sup>

Everything suggests that these lines were also an encryption key offered by Kogan-Bernshtejn—a critical, persecuted intellectual—to her own readers, urging them to decode the anti-authoritarian message of both La Boétie’s work and her own. This is particularly evident when she addresses the possibilities of emancipation. She argues that in a society based on voluntary servitude there is room for emancipation through the work of intellectuals: they must inspire a desire for freedom in the masses, who are “opiated under the yoke of tyranny after centuries of voluntary servitude” (*ibid.*, p. 79). However, in a hierarchically organized society which is structured as a chain of oppressed and oppressors, there is no opportunity for the cultural work of intellectuals, who have no choice but, as the *Discours* concludes, to count on “the help of the celestial forces” (*ibid.*, p. 82).

As Kogan-Bernshtejn writes: “La Boétie invites us to lift our eyes to heaven and entrust ourselves to the divine punishment of the tyrant” (*ibid.*, pp. 81-82). Obviously she was not really hoping for divine intervention: the sentence is, rather, a rhetorical move to express the impossibility of acting for freedom. Yet, the reference to divine intervention sounds strange, out of tune with the rest of the text: just as Kogan-Bernshtejn herself had stressed the “forced and ambiguous” character of some passages in La Boétie’s text, so this

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(such as allegories and metaphors) to mask the true thought underlying the text.

22. Montaigne discloses the oblique character of La Boétie’s writing, revealing one of La Boétie’s main influences: Plutarch. In particular, in a passage from *De vitioso pudore* (10, 522E-F), Plutarch writes: “Those who said that the inhabitants of Asia are slaves of a man only because they are not able to pronounce the syllable ‘no!’, did not speak seriously, but made a joke: those who are too considerate, however, could avoid giving unwelcome and absurd services without uttering a word, but only by arching their eyebrows or lowering their eyes. Euripides says that ‘silence is an answer for the wise’.” As Nicola Panichi notes, in Plutarch’s passage, the strong argument (the inability to say “no,” i.e. a simple act of will) is put forward reductively, as if it were a joke: it is the “oblique method,” according to which one pretends to mention *en passant* what is actually the main theme. According to Panichi, the oblique method is used by Montaigne himself: the vague and reductive hints to the *Discours* in the *Essais* and the empty chapter at its middle are an oblique way to point to what is most important (2008, pp. 96-97; see also Rosen, 1996).

sentence sounds like a warning to readers. It forces them to be wary, and to return to the text to find another reading trail.

Indeed, the attentive reader will find a passage where Kogan-Bernshtejn seems to address her colleagues, Soviet humanists and literati; those who, enduring Stalin's persecution in the heyday of the antic cosmopolitan campaign, "cannot learn of each other's existence and remain separate, isolated" (*ibid.*, p. 78). Despite the difficulty of emancipation in a society not based solely on voluntary servitude but on a hierarchical and pyramidal structure, Kogan-Bernshtejn seems to entrust them—and herself—with a task:

La Boétie, like many other humanists, pins his hope in the strength of reason, which he exalted so much, and in the growth of culture. It was the enlightened individuals who had a central and prominent role to play, and in whose hearts the natural love for freedom had not faded. These individual freedom-lovers, having overcome all the obstacles posed by tyranny and joined forces, will be able with their enlightened work gradually to open the people's eyes, and when the time comes, the people will say their powerful and decisive "no," which will put an end to the servitude of millions. It is very probable that La Boétie would entrust the role of these educators of the people, those who teach them how to obtain freedom, to those who cultivate the new Enlightenment, to the humanists. (*ibid.*, p. 79)

Kogan-Bernshtejn accomplishes the task of "inspiring the desire for freedom" precisely by publishing the edition of the *Discours*, which in this sense stands for both the message and the vehicle of the message. It amounts to a call to Soviet intellectuals and humanists, who "feel the full weight of the yoke," who feel the burden of Stalinist persecution, and who, at the same time, "ne peuvent se retenir de le secouer" (*ibid.*).<sup>23</sup> Like La Boétie four centuries earlier, Kogan-Bernshtejn's opaque and obscure prose was used to send a message of emancipation to her "companions," those who, as La Boétie says, "ne s'approvoisent jamais de la sujétion" and who "quand la liberté seroit entierement perdue et toute hots du monde, l'imaginent et la sentient en leur esprit, et encore la savourent" (2002, p. 156).

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23. Kogan-Bernshtejn uses La Boétie's words here (see La Boétie, 2002, p. 156). On the question of intellectual community and trusting humanists to educate the masses, see Bizer (2007).

## Conclusion

This analysis of the Russian edition published during Stalin's anticommunist campaign allows us to add detail to and understand better the background of the structure of the *Discours*—the gamebook, as we have called it. Both were written during a time of persecution, when writing was a potentially dangerous activity. The philosopher Leo Strauss has shown what it meant to write in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: in order to escape persecution and censorship, writers and intellectuals learned to write their message between the lines, using subterfuges and rhetorical devices to mask it.

Persecution cannot prevent even public expression of the heterodox truth, for a man of independent thought can utter his view in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines. (1941, p. 490)

The intellectual develops an art of writing that allows him or her to avoid persecution and this requires a complementary art of reading": a particular attention on the part of the reader to figures of speech, the overlapping of argumentative levels, and the subterfuges, traps, and clues set by the writer. For example, "if a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high-school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing" (*ibid.*, p. 496). The reader must distinguish the author's true intention from the false, from what the author himself has inserted to confuse readers.

However, as David Munnich points out, Strauss distinguishes between a "true" and a "false" text, thus assuming that a text has a rigid and fixed structure: with particular reference to Rousseau's *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, Strauss "wants to forcibly lock up the text in two ways already plotted" (2016, p. 212). But, as Munnich suggests, it may be more fruitful, and more consistent with the interpretative and translation history of the *Discours*, to "open the text to a plurality of interpretations" (*ibid.*).

The three editions that have been presented here show how such a plural, open reading of the text is carried out. Each translator and/or editor reads La Boétie's *Discours* in his or her own way, giving a specific interpretation to the text: an interpretation which is always meaningful and valid, because of the constitutive openness of the text,

while at the same time it partly derives from the pressures of the editor's particular circumstances.

The Italian edition is particularly revealing in this respect. It presents two different readings of the text, each driven by a different intention of the editor. These differences are due to a radical change of political circumstances: at the time of the fall of the Mussolini dictatorship, the *Discours* is presented as a civic textbook, aiming at educating people to freedom; with the Nazi occupation, La Boétie's message becomes more complex, suggesting that freedom is something to be conquered through struggle. This case, in which the same interpreter radically changes his view of the text based on external circumstances, thus seems to deserve special attention.

On the other hand, Kurz's wartime edition, in which the message of the *Discours*—although written by a pacifist—is seen able to legitimize U.S. military intervention in Europe, is very different from the Soviet edition, which is intended by its editor, Kogan-Bernshtejn, to be both a text able to inspire the desire of freedom among humanists and intellectuals and an oblique tool against the persecution of the Stalin regime.

None of these interpretations is wrong. And yet, each of them says something about the editor or translator—about his or her political intention—while still bringing to light a possible reading of La Boétie's text, a specific hermeneutic perspective included in his work. The *Discours* opens up a variety of different readings and uses; it is precisely the plurality of interpretations, the constitutive openness and indeterminacy of the text, that makes reading a possible experience of freedom: there is no single road mapped out, and although there are more or less plausible interpretations, the choice of which way to go is always open.

In this sense, reading becomes a practice of freedom. On a first level, it is a "hermeneutic" freedom, a freedom to choose one's own path in the text. But, as an experience of freedom, reading is capable of instilling, at least *in nuce*, that desire for freedom of which the voluntary serfs are deprived. On a second level, the reader establishes, by reading and interpreting the text, a relationship not only with the text, but also with the author and with other readers.<sup>24</sup> It is in a

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24. On the power of language to stimulate both the desire for servitude and the desire for freedom, see Lefort (2002); Visentin (2018).

relationship with others, in what La Boétie called “*entreconnaissance*,” that one can experience a wider, political freedom.<sup>25</sup>

The *Discours* has been described as a magical text, capable of generating between readers, through the medium of interpretation, bonds of mutual recognition, of friendship: such a bond stems from a common and shared experience of freedom. The first relationship of friendship generated by the *Discours* is that between Montaigne and La Boétie himself. And it is no coincidence that Montaigne, in the famous chapter XXVIII of the *Essais*, entitled “De l’amitié” and dedicated to La Boétie, connects friendship and “voluntary freedom,” meaning by this expression a kind of antidote to voluntary servitude. “Montaigne invited his reader to look for true beauty at the core of his first book, in the new and paradoxical positive ‘servitude volontaire’ of friendship” (Rigolot, 2005, p. 333).<sup>26</sup> For both Montaigne and La Boétie, friendship is an intimate and political relationship. It involves the union of souls, mutual understanding and recognition, and, at the same time, respect and preservation of the uniqueness of each: it can thus be at the origin of the creation of communities of “tous uns.” As Miguel Abensour has argued (2006, 2018), “tous uns” is an orthographic invention within the *Discours*, with which La Boétie—as mentioned above—aims to depict a community of people where the uniqueness of the individual is preserved, and that is opposed to the image of the voluntary serfs subjected to the tyrant, to the One: “si elle [la nature] a monsté en toutes choses qu’elle ne voloit pas tant nous faire tous unis que *tous uns*: il ne faut pas faire doute que nous ne soions tous naturellement libres, puis que nous sommes tous compaignons” (La Boétie, 2002, p. 142; our italics).

Freedom and friendship are, then, for La Boétie, two sides of the same relationship. The *Discours*, in its performative dimension, praises those experiences of freedom that are experiences of *entreconnaissance*, of friendship. And in fact (perhaps not coincidentally), it often contributes to producing them. La Boétie’s editions are often the work of groups of people. This is the case with the famous 1976 Payot edition (on which Miguel Abensour, Marcel Gauchet, Claude Lefort,

25. “[La nature] nous a tous faits de mesme forme, et comme il semble, a mesme moule, afin de nous entreconnoistre tous pour compaignons ou plustost pour frères” (La Boétie, 2002, p. 141).

26. On this topic also see Desan (2017, pp. 112-154). On Montaigne’s idea of friendship and intellectual community as political concepts, see Bizer (2007, pp. 259-279; 2011, especially the chap. “Montaigne, La Boétie, Homer”).

and Pierre Clastres collaborated) and in part also true of the Italian edition of 1943-1944.<sup>27</sup> Both La Boétie and Kogan-Bernshtejn indirectly address a hypothetical community of readers, their hypothetical companions in freedom who “sentient le pois du joug et ne se peuvent tenir de le secouer” (*ibid.*, p. 156). In this sense, to retrace the interpretative and translation history of the *Discours* is to discover the small communities of friendship generated throughout history by the *Discours* itself; it is to find, over the centuries, one’s companions in freedom.

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27. While working on the Italian edition of the *Discours*, Pancrazi was at his villa in Cortona, Tuscany. Here, during WWII, he hosted various writers who were friends of his, each working on historical and literary projects that were more or less openly antifascist: Vittore Branca, Diego Valeri, Giacomo Debenedetti (see Frandini, 2001).



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