

The Green Lion's Preface

Note on the Translation

The present little volume is a partial realization of a long-standing goal of the Green Lion: Lavoisier's magnificent *Treatise* has too long been hobbled by an archaic English translation, and we have hoped to set it free. Our aim, however, goes far beyond modernizing the text. Because the present translation is different from other renderings of scientific works that readers may have encountered, we think it appropriate to say what we think a Green Lion translation should accomplish.

There is a lot of variety in the Green Lion translations, but one feature they hold in common is a deep respect for the original text. We have all seen plenty of translations that are tinted, and sometimes tainted, by an evident feeling on the part of the translator that he or she knows the author's intent well enough to rephrase or even paraphrase passages that appear awkwardly or obscurely worded. These efforts certainly have their place, but that's not where we want to go. We are especially interested in the odd or clumsy expression, because those oddities often bespeak a remarkable and original idea for which the author does not yet have a clear expression. We want readers to be able to watch a profound thinker struggle to think through a new and difficult thought.

We are committed to a translation of this text that reveals and traces Lavoisier's thought and voice as much as possible. We want to be sure not to elide over nuances of diction, imagery, and metaphor that may bear on precisely the way Lavoisier was thinking about the phenomenon he is describing. We pay attention to maintaining Lavoisier's voice, avoiding phrasing that verges on paraphrase, and keeping a little closer to the structure of the French where we do not see a clear advantage in departing from it. We value a translation that is scrupulous about bringing through the original author's written expression, including images and subtle resonances, even at the expense of more awkward and unfamiliar wording, leaving room for generations of students, readers, and scholars to dig out interesting angles. The translation should stand on the solid ground of the text, perhaps most of all when we are

not sure why that ground has the shape that it displays. We write for those who study the poetry of Lavoisier, as well as those who study his science.

In writing and refining the text and notes for this Green Cat Module, the Green Lion editors and translators have been immeasurably aided by our long involvement, as students and teachers, in St. John's College's unique approach to the study of scientific texts. For over fifty years, on two campuses, every freshman has spent several weeks of the spring semester in a close study of Lavoisier's *Treatise*—a study that involves not only reading and discussion but also working through Lavoisier's chief experiments in the laboratory. The editors and translators have thus benefited from St. John's deep and rich body of experience that we can justly claim to be unequalled anywhere in the world.

For this translation the Green Lion contracted with Chester Burke and Matthew Holtzman, two faculty members at St. John's who, in addition to an impressive command of the French of Lavoisier's time, have many decades of experience reading Lavoisier's *Treatise* with nonspecialist undergraduate students. The Green Lion editors, Howard Fisher, Bill Donahue, and Dana Densmore, have all also had extensive experience reading and helping students read Lavoisier—all three of us starting in the 1960s. Fisher and Burke were important early and ongoing guides to the laboratory program on the Annapolis campus, and Donahue was Director of Laboratories for many years on the Santa Fe campus.

It has been our joint effort to bring through Lavoisier's thought in all its lucidity, preserving the excitement of this moment, a moment on the cusp of making new sense and order out of a jungle of chemical phenomena. The resulting translation is faithful to the text in the ways described above, while producing a version that reads smoothly in English. We are honored that Burke and Holtzman have entrusted us with their work, and we are delighted to present it to a larger public, enhanced by Fisher's illuminating notes.

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for the Green Lion