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THE TROUBLE WITH TRANSLATION

Reading foreign literature in the English language may be an enriching experience, but like a little learning, it has its dangers.

THERE is an anecdote, possibly apocryphal, about a woman at a cocktail party in Paris telling James Thurber how much she had enjoyed his "delightful sketches" in French translation. "Thank you," said Thurber. "It is undoubtedly true that my writing loses a good deal in the original."

Thurber's humor, here as elsewhere, obliquely points to a truth: this time to the truth that a translation may be better literature than the work which inspired it. For example, for more than a century the best poets and critics in France have thought Edgar Allan Poe a much greater poet than English-speaking poets and critics have thought he was. Aldous Huxley, in *Music at Night*, points out that "the substance of Poe is refined; it is his form that is vulgar;" the distinctively "literary" part of Poe's work (his "walloping dactylic meter," for example), which is vulgar, is untranslatable into French. We can account for Baudelaire's admiration of Poe, Huxley suggests, only by the "happy ignorance of English versification" which permitted him to misread Poe's verse as if the stresses were even, as in French verse, and to hear in it "heaven knows what exotic subtlety of rhythm."

To say that translation may have such startling effects is not, however, to say that there is anything wrong with a reader getting what he can out of the work of writers in other languages, even if what he gets is not there in the original. The danger lies elsewhere. Translations

are not the same thing as their originals. My purpose here is to call attention to some of the consequences of ignoring that fact.

A popular and respected young American writer was quoted a couple of years ago as saying that he was troubled because his writing sounded to him as if it had been translated from Russian. A good many young writers write as if they were being translated from some foreign tongue. And the reason, I suspect, is that a great many young men and women of literary inclinations form their tastes and their styles on translations.

If you look at the catalogue descriptions of college courses in "modern" literature; if you read the "literary" essays in undergraduate magazines or in the "literary" quarterlies; or if you listen to "literary" conversation among the young—you will notice that a high percentage of the books discussed are translations. Books originally written in English, or in American-English, are no doubt read in even greater quantities—but the literary touchstones, the dominant influences are foreign-language writers such as Camus, Sartre, Perce, Gide, and Proust; Moravia, Lorca, and Kafka; the great Russians, the masters of Zen, and the writers of *hokku*.

A recent catalogue of paperbacks selected especially for classroom use listed forty-six titles under "Poetry"; exactly half were translations. Roughly one third of the titles listed under "Literature" were translations. Of the pick of the paperbacks in drama, more than half the titles were translations.

In many ways this is an encouraging situation. The implied awareness of universal humanity which is involved in such interest, and the breadth of sympathy which it suggests, are admirable. The "literary internationalism" which

prevails among young American readers is obviously a significant fact, without any parallel in history. For the universality of literary culture in medieval Europe—which is the nearest approach to what we seem to be getting these days—was provincial by comparison. The medieval writer who, like Chaucer, kept in touch with contemporary literature on the continent, did not have to cope with anything like the diversity of material which now floods our bookracks from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Moreover, the international literature of medieval times was written in an international language: Latin. Writers in all countries had at their command at least two languages: their own vernacular, and the Latin which was shared by educated readers throughout Christendom. Furthermore, most educated people knew more than one of the living vernacular tongues, and such a writer as Chaucer could read his French and Italian contemporaries.

Nowadays things are different. No generation of young "literary" people has ever been more linguistically illiterate than our contemporary Americans. Very few of them know any foreign language well enough to read it with an appreciation of its literary qualities. They talk of having read Dostoevski and Proust and Kafka; they have even "had" them, as they put it, in courses. But they can't read Russian or French or German without a dictionary, if at all.

What they have read is a translation—by no means the same thing as the work itself. It may be better; it may be worse; theoretically it may be equally good or bad. But it is not the equivalent of the work which activated the translator.

The ways in which a translation differs from the original, and the peculiar qualities which translations tend to share, are matters that should be of interest to writers as well as to readers. Yet they are commonly ignored. We all talk as if we had read Dostoevski, Plato, and Jules Verne even if we cannot read a word of Russian, Greek, or French. And those who edit and publish translations are as careless of the distinction as we are.

A conspicuous example is *The Question*, published in New York by George Braziller, Inc. in

1958. According to the title page it was by Henri Alleg, with an introduction by Jean Paul Sartre. Nowhere in the book itself or on its dust jacket was there any indication that the words it contains were not written by either Alleg or Sartre. The book was completely printed, bound, and jacketed before anyone noticed this. Then a small slip of paper was inserted into each copy, bearing the words, "*The Question* was translated from the French by John Calder." Even with the belatedly inserted slip, the reader is unable to tell whether Sartre's introduction was translated or not, and if so, by whom.

If this volume were unique in its disregard of the distinction between original work and translation, it would be merely a publishing curiosity. But there are many translations on the market which either ignore the distinction altogether or make so little of it that the reader is encouraged to assume that the book he is reading is the one written by the author whose name appears on the title page.

THE GETTYSBURG HARANGUE

THERE is a volume in the Rinehart series of paperbacks for use in colleges, purporting to contain three plays by Henrik Ibsen, with an introduction by Benfield Pressey. Nowhere is there any indication that the plays it contains were not written in English and that the texts here printed are translations. Similarly, Dolphin Books issued a paperback edition of *Nana* which bears no indication of the fact that Zola wrote it in French and that some unspecified person made this English version of it.

It is bad enough that publishers are so casual about the distinction, but it is more surprising (and more damaging) that the scholars and critics who write introductions to these works ignore it. The Modern Library College Edition of *Faust*, for example, acknowledges on its title page that it is Bayard Taylor's translation of Goethe's original, but the scholarly introduction by Professor Victor Lange, Chairman of German Studies at Cornell University, makes only one oblique reference to the fact that the reader is not going to encounter, in this volume, the poetry of Goethe. The reader is told that he must remember that *Faust* is a work of the imagination and that he should recognize "the power of its poetic effects"; but nowhere does Professor Lange indicate that the poetic effects he will encounter are those achieved by Bayard Taylor's English, not those achieved by Goethe's German.

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It was while reading Goethe that George Henry Lewes, the nineteenth-century English critic, became convinced that poetry was untranslatable. And in his discussion of the problem, he began by showing that it is even impossible to translate a line of English poetry into other English words.

Each of the following lines (which Lewes provided as examples) means, in a superficial way, what the others mean.

1. The river runneth free from all restraint.
2. The river flows, now here, now there, at will.
3. The river, self-impelled, pursues its course.
4. The river glideth at his own sweet will.

The last line, of course, is Wordsworth's, from the sonnet "Upon Westminster Bridge." Notice that each of the others conveys quite accurately a part of the sense of Wordsworth's line. Notice also that each of the "translations" preserves the basic pentameter movement of the original, which is rarely possible in translating to a foreign language, and that one of them even preserves the original rhyme sound. But notice also that the wayward rhythm of Wordsworth's line, with the swift movement over "at his" and the slowing down on "own sweet will," echoes the waywardness that is denoted by the words, while the strict de-dum, de-dum, de-dum of each of the "translated" lines is so disciplined that it denies the waywardness the words assert.

If the English language, which is so full of what we call synonyms, cannot provide an adequate translation of a line in English, it should be no surprise that translations into other languages are impossible. The Frenchman who reads Andre Gide's translation of Hamlet's speech to the players is certainly not getting the equivalent of Shakespeare's "trippingly on the tongue" in "*d'une manière cursive et bien articulée.*" Abraham Lincoln's most famous utterance becomes somehow absurd when Etienne Gilson has to refer to it as the "*Harangue de Gettysburg.*"

Such examples are not merely amusing; they illustrate a real problem—a problem whose implications for international cultural exchange are quite serious. It has been said that the reason Robert Frost has never received the Nobel Prize for literature is that his idiomatic and colloquial diction is so much a part of the meaning of his poems that no translation gives any conception of their intensity. What is translatable of a deceptively simple poem like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" would surely not

suggest that it is one of the great lyrics in our language.

There are vast obstacles, however, to translating any poems from one language to another. Let us look, for example, at the opening lines of the *Faust* translation which Professor Lange offers the student in the Modern Library edition, and compare them with the opening lines of another translation, made some years ago by John Anster. Both translators are working from the same original. Both passages picture the sun singing on its destined path, and both evoke the sound of thunder. But Anster's lines are an image of continuing motion:

The sun, as in the ancient days,
'Mong sister stars in rival song,
His destined path observes, obeys,
And still in thunder rolls along.

Taylor's are an image of cessation:

The sun-orb sings, in emulation,
'Mid brother-spheres, his ancient round:
His path predestined through Creation
He ends with step of thunder-sound.

One might argue that the differences are not important to the over-all effect of the verse-drama; that even the finality of Taylor's sun putting its foot down thunderously doesn't really alter anything essential to the whole. But the images of which a poem is composed are parts of an organic whole; they act upon one another and their effect is cumulative. Two *Fausts*, composed of two different sets of images, are two different poems.

PINCH-HITTING FOR HOMER

SOME authorities insist that in spite of the admitted difficulties, translation without loss is possible. One of them is Dudley Fitts, whose knowledge of foreign languages is infinitely greater than mine, who is a fine poet himself, and who is the author of a most interesting play which he entitled "*The Antigone* by Sophocles," as well as of other translations.* He argues that even though translation is, by definition, a "carrying across," and even though it is impossible to "carry across" from one language to another those "nuances of diction, of sound, of tone" that make any good poem an entity, poetry can nevertheless be translated. The "proof" he

* Mr. Fitts contributed to an important volume of essays *On Translation* which Reuben A. Brower edited in 1959 for the Harvard University Press. I am indebted to several of the essays in this volume for data and ideas.

offers is that, as we have already noted, there are some translations which are better poems than the originals—though how this proves the point I cannot imagine. He concludes that although a translator's job is difficult, it is not desperate if he is "poet enough to make a new poem in the place of the other." This seems to me an argument that "carrying across" a poem from one language to another is possible because a poet can write a poem which can pinch-hit for another.

Essentially the same argument is offered by Monsignor Ronald Knox, translator of the Bible and other books, in an essay "On English Translation" published in his book, *Literary Distractions* (1958). Monsignor Knox claims that the rhetoric and emphasis of the original can, with intelligent care and sympathetic understanding, be rendered in English. The only elements which cannot be given an English equivalent, he says, are such minor things as "tricks of manner," which the translator needs not feel bound to imitate.

But what does he mean by "tricks of manner"? He answers this query by giving specific examples. The *Iliad*, for instance, need not be rendered in English hexameters because the prosody of Homer is, presumably, a "trick of manner." Again, there is no reason, he says, "to use long sentences in your translation because your author (Cicero for example) uses long sentences. There is no harm in subordinating your sentences where your author—the Book of Proverbs, for example—is content to co-ordinate them."

This argument seems to me to lead to nonsense. Surely sentence length, co-ordination and subordination, are matters of rhetoric and emphasis and not mere "tricks of manner." Short sentences, which reflect (and induce in the reader) discrete ideas in sequence, are certainly not the equivalent of long ones which interweave ideas and relate them to one another in complex patterns of thought. Nor is a sentence which subordinates one idea to another the equivalent of one which presents the ideas as co-ordinate equals. It is probably true that the *Iliad* should not be translated into English hexameters, but the reason is not that the original Greek hexameters were a mere trick of style. English hexameters have a ludicrous seesaw effect which is anything but the equivalent of the Greek.

Elsewhere in his essay Monsignor Knox says, quite rightly I think, that the translations we call great ones—the ones we like to read—are those

by men such as North (who translated Plutarch) and Florio (who translated Montaigne), who, although "not always accurate," were determined "to produce a work of art, not a mere transcript of foreign phrases and foreign idioms, set out under the deadly apology, 'Well, that's what it says!' " Which I shall translate as the assertion that the great translations are the ones in which, though a good deal be lost, a great deal is gained. North's version of Plutarch may well owe some of its greatness to the fact that it is twice removed from its source, North having made his English classic from Amyot's French translation of the Latin original. Like the King James version of the Bible, great translations are not literally accurate, but they carry over from the original what *can* be carried and incorporate it in a unified work of art in another language. Those which do this come to have an authority of their own, the kind of emotional authority which led one devotee of the King James version to defend it against the claims of a more exact and literal modern translation by saying that what was good enough for Jesus was good enough for him.

A RAGE FOR PROSODY

NO ONE these days would, I suppose, maintain that the kinds of difficulty I have illustrated rob translations of literary works of usefulness. Nor would anyone be likely to argue that it is a bad thing to have so many translations of great books cheaply available. But like most blessings, plentiful translations can be curses in disguise.

More than a century ago Emerson noted in his *Journal* that he was delighted by the way the "cheap press" and "universal reading" had called forth so many translations from the Greek, German, Italian, and French. "To me," he wrote, "the command is loud to use the time by reading these books, and I should as soon think of foregoing the railroad [which he loved to ride on] and the telegraph as to neglect these."

Yet, three years later, Emerson had some second thoughts on the subject. The "multitude of translations from the Latin and Greek classics" had played havoc with the study of those languages, he observed, since every student now had access to a translation of his author. "The only remedy," he wrote, "would be a rage for prosody, which would enforce attention to the words themselves of the Latin or Greek verse."

It seems to me that Emerson was right on both counts. My feeling is that students, and readers

generally, should as soon (though no sooner) forego the airplane and television as neglect the translations of Oriental and European literature which are becoming so abundantly and cheaply available. But I also think that they should be constantly aware (and that publishers, editors, and teachers should constantly remind them) that what they are reading is someone's English version of a work which, in its original language, had unique and untranslatable qualities. Further, they should remember that the more the original work depended for its effect upon those qualities which make literature a fine art, the less is a translation able to provide equivalent effects. Baudelaire's translations of Poe may be "better" poems than those Poe wrote; North's translation of Plutarch may be as great a book as Plutarch's original; but those who read them have read Baudelaire's version of Poe and North's version of Plutarch; not Poe, not Plutarch.

We must, of course, have translations, especially in a world in which people who speak different languages are increasingly coming in contact with one another. And a good deal of the translation we make use of is quite exact enough for all practical purposes—even for distinguishing

which door to go through if you are in need of comfort at Idlewild International Airport.

But even in the translation of nonliterary works, the difficulties are enormous. The *Rocky Mountain Herald* reported, a couple of years ago, an instance of Moscow's difficulties with English. According to Claud Cockburn, former correspondent of the London *Daily Worker*, the Comintern puts out an English-language weekly for the faithful. In one notable issue it solemnly proclaimed that "The lower organs of the Party in Britain must make still greater efforts to penetrate the backward parts of the proletariat." It is possible, of course, that this is just what the Comintern thought it was saying, but one has charitable doubts.

Our own attempts to communicate with the Russians in their language may be no more successful. Thanks to Robert E. Alexander, the architect, I can pass along this cheering bit of news. According to Colonel Vernon Walters, President Eisenhower's official interpreter, some electronic engineers invented an automatic translating machine into which they fed 1,500 words of Basic English and their Russian equivalent, claiming that it would translate instantly without the risk of human error. In the first test they asked it to translate the simple phrase: "Out of sight, out of mind." Gears spun, lights blinked, and the machine typed out in Russian: "Invisible Idiot."

On the theory that the machine would make a better showing with a less epigrammatic passage, they fed it the scriptural saying: "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The machine instantly translated it, and came up with "The liquor is holding out all right, but the meat has spoiled."

Even so, the future of the automatic translating machine seems to be assured. Machines with larger and more discriminating vocabularies are being built. But the enormous cost of machines capable of translating enormously complex language will, I suppose, result in powerful pressures to simplify and regularize the language in which we communicate, officially and otherwise, across national boundaries. I have heard that similar pressures are forcing the Japanese and Chinese to simplify their languages to meet the requirements of the typewriter, typesetting machines, and other mechanisms essential to modern industrial society.

Machines have a tendency to demand simplification and standardization of the material they work on, whether that be sugar-beets which must be bred to sizes and shapes suitable for mechan-

ical harvesting or language which must be modified to suit mechanical translators. And since translating machines can be helped to classify patterns of words (such as adverbial clauses and positives) by punctuation and word order, there will be a tendency to stabilize and regularize conventions of punctuation and word order. There will surely be a tendency, also, toward a reduction of the inflected forms of words, the elimination of idioms, and the discovery of a minimal vocabulary with few, if any, near synonyms to discriminate shades of meaning or to convey overtones of feeling. There will be, in short, increasing pressures toward a language incapable of literary use.

TOWARD A NEUTER STYLE

TO SOME extent all translating has a tendency to produce language unsuitable for literary use—at least to the extent that accuracy and fidelity to the original text are the translator's objectives. For one of the aims of a conscientious translator is, as Monsignor Knox has said, to become as nearly as may be Goethe, Proust, or whoever, so that all traces of the translator's personality disappear.

But if the translator conscientiously tries to eliminate his own personality from what he writes, and if the elements of the original which convey the author's personality are the very ones which are least likely to carry over into another tongue, what can we expect in translations but writing which tends to be stylistically neuter? If the translator has a style of his own, he is under a kind of moral obligation to negate and unsex it in an effort to subordinate it to his original. Yet the style of the original is the untranslatable essence of the author's handling of his own language.

It is probably true that the vast majority of generally used words are translatable enough for all practical purposes. Joshua Whatmough, the eminent linguistics scholar, describes a statistical study which shows that of the 3,000 words, more or less, which make up the core of our vocabularies, as many as 95 per cent are neutral in value. Such words, one presumes, have relatively exact equivalents in other languages—at least in languages spoken by people whose cultures are similar to our own. We need not consider here staggering problems we would face with languages like that of the South American Indian tribe to whom the past lies ahead (since we can "see" it) and the future lies behind (since it is out of our range of vision). Imagine trying to

provide that tribe with an adequate translation of "Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your flight."

In most translating, fortunately, we can count on a high percentage of neutral words which can be given neutral equivalents without much loss. But as Professor Whatmough points out, 5 per cent of the words we ordinarily use are far from neutral. They have what he calls "strong and high-pitched overtones" which in fact "call the tune" and convey the real meaning of what we say. Such words, of course, form a much higher percentage of the words in literary prose (and advertising) than of those in everyday speech, and a still higher percentage in poetry. And it is their "overtones," their emotive and aesthetic values, which are precisely those "nuances of diction, of sound, of tone" which cannot be "carried across" to any words substituted for them.

What is "carried across" is the "purely referential" meaning of the neutral words. To that will be added meanings deriving from the less numerous words which, however reverently the translator respects the "tune" of the original, can at best parallel or suggest the emotive and aesthetic overtones of the work he is translating. Whatever overtones a translation has, whatever real meanings it conveys, are supplied by the translator. To the extent that he translates freely, these overtones express his own personality; to the extent that he abjures freedom and strives for fidelity, his writing becomes stylistically neutral, or even neuter—which is to say, incapable of generating life.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE PARTICULAR

THE significance of this fact is generally overlooked. Readers and writers who form their literary tastes upon a heavy diet of such neuter prose and verse may easily become habituated to a style which sounds—as the young writer I have quoted feels that his own does—like "something translated from the Russian." It is true, as John Hollander has pointed out, that writers of the past few decades have read widely in other literatures than their own, and that much recent poetry "has sprung from, or even consisted in, translations from writing in other languages." Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot are only two of the most eminent and influential of the poets who have translated foreign works and incorporated translations in their own poems. It is also true, as Hollander was, I think, the first

to observe, that "the styles worked out in connection with certain particular renderings" of foreign writing "have proved influential as poetic styles in themselves."

English prosody, and even English prose, has no doubt been enriched thereby—as it has been enriched by earlier influences from other languages. But not every translator has the genius to work out styles in connection with his translations which are desirable models of English writing. The great majority of translators evolve styles which, as we have seen, are doubly deficient in personality since both the original author's and the translator's have been suppressed.

By all means let us read the great writers who have written and are writing in languages other than our own. But if we are going to learn style from Chekhov or Proust or Kafka, let us learn Russian, French, or German. In this area at least, translations are no remedy for our ignorance. The only remedy, as Emerson said, is "a rage for prosody," enforcing attention to the

words the masters wrote in their own language. From the reading of literature in translation one can learn much, but not how to write in one's own tongue. Not even, I am convinced how to read with due appreciation those who do write in that tongue. And I am disposed to wonder, when I look at a French translation of *Huckleberry Finn* for example, if we do not commonly exaggerate the extent to which translations broaden (or at least deepen) international understanding and our sense of mankind's universal humanity. For just as the Ideal of Woman can never, as the young novelist Herbert Gold says, "replace the way Sally scratches her head," an abstracted ideal of the American world as seen by a boy adrift on the Mississippi can never replace the untranslatable particulars of the way Huck sees and describes that world.

Humanity is not an abstraction, but a set of particulars. There is no way to be universal, as Huck Finn for instance is, without being idiosyncratic, or to be international without being untranslatably localized.