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THE CURSE OF ADAM

It is often said that the curse of Adam took several forms, one of the most ambiguous being the linguistic division of mankind. And it is this diversity that created the need for translation.

While the problems intrinsic in the act of translation have been endlessly enumerated, it is still useful to have them underlined by an international gathering of writers and translators.

To supply even a bird's eye view of the 60 papers presented in the course of the last Supreme Council for Culture conference on translation proves a near impossibility, though. And expressing one's own understanding of the main debates and propositions, while less ambitious, seems to be the more sensible way to go. One central tenet relating to literary translation (by far the conference's most popular topic) is that to translate literature is to make choices, since it is impossible to translate an entire literary canon into another language. Such a choice can be influenced, as much as anything, by the translator or the publisher's taste.

In my contribution to the discussion I observed that more or less the same questions had been debated in a 1961 PEN conference held in Rome. On the latter occasion Alberto Moravia, who chaired the conference, insisted that a literary translation was as creative and complex an act as the writing of the original. The translator must himself be a creative writer. In the case of poetry, he must be a poet. In the Supreme Council for Culture meeting hall, it was interesting to see how little this debate has evolved since then. Moravia's viewpoint was affirmed and denied yet again as participants continued to grapple with the central questions.

Then as now, one such question was that of literal vs interpretive translation. Moravia compared two Italian translations of The Iliad: one, accomplished by a scholar, was correct and literal; in the other, by a poet, the epic was almost completely rewritten. While the first sold just a few copies, Moravia pointed out, the second became a bestseller.

The essential paradox of language is that the more intensely local it is, the more it conveys the universal. The participants' views on this paradox aside, however, it was the impossibility of translating poetry that engaged them more briskly. Robert Front has called poetry "nationalist"; the translation of poetry is indeed often described as a long and slow process

of compromise. In the words of the leading translation theoretician, J G Weighman, what the translator does amount to "ceaselessly reflecting objects in a distorting mirror with the hope, each time, that the reflection will be accurate," although the translator knows that this is impossible.

One speaker traced the history of translation in Egypt. The Rosetta stone is evidence of Egypt's assiduous concern with translation through the ages. If it were not for the deciphering of the Rosetta inscriptions (written in Hieroglyphic, as well as in Demotic and Greek), the glory of Egyptian civilisation could not have been revealed quite so soon. Translation was the key that granted the world entry into a world otherwise unknown. With its Library and Lyceum, Alexandria was not only an epistemological lighthouse but an active international centre for translation. It was there that the Greek classics were collected, edited, translated and preserved, the works of Homer being among the foremost examples.

The modern Egyptian interest in translation dates back to the time of Mohamed Ali, who sent missions to both France and Italy on which young Egyptians acquired the education necessary for the modernisation of Egypt. On his return from Paris, one such (Azharite) young man, Refaa Rafei El-Tahtawi, established the school of Al-Alsun (Tongues), which undertook the translation of major French works.

Literature did return to the foreground, however, with an emphasis on the problematic nature of literary translations. A story written in a language is meant to be read in that language. The social significance of words and their idiomatic implications are so intricate, delicate and complex that a translation is apt to partially spoil the original. It is not enough to learn a language through books: one must live in it, so to speak, and live in it long enough to understand and assimilate its social function. Moreover, one must have an accurate first-hand knowledge of the social, geographic, economic and political background of the country.

To illustrate this point, the speaker explained how the language of an industrial society, for example, differs radically from that of an agricultural one. Metaphors, he pointed out, are adopted from life experience in order to make language more palpable through their images. In the case of an agricultural country, say, metaphors will tend to refer to fields, crops, irrigation, harvest; in industrial society, on the other hand, they relate to machines, factories, production etc.

I, for one party, attempted to highlight the emotional associations of words.

Saqia, for instance, is usually translated as "waterwheel", a word that, while communicating the function of the saqia, fails to take account of its emotional significance and symbolism. To an Egyptian, the saqia evokes a whole stream of ideas and emotions which a non-Egyptian will not readily

grasp. It conjures up the meeting place of lovers, the place where quarrels are settled and feasts held, and where shade is sought and found. It also brings up a medley of folklore, works of art and songs.

Another difficulty facing the translator is that of association. The translator will come across simple words that are impossible to translate. He might provide the right synonym and still not manage to convey the complete suite of implications the original word commands. A translation of Tawfiq El-Hakim's The Diary of a Country Magistrate, for example, was published under the title The Maze of Justice. The translator was an Arabic scholar and in one case, at least, he altogether missed the meaning of a simple word. In the book one of the cases cited is that of a man who was caught stealing a corn cob. The Arabic word for cob is kuz, which also means, as any Arabic-English dictionary will tell you, a "jar". So the translator presented the case as one of "stealing a jar full of maize." Similarly, in one of Mahmoud Taymour's short stories, the writer refers to sleeping in the oven room. To an Englishman the idea of sleeping on an oven is ludicrous. To the Egyptian, who is familiar with this common provincial practice, the oven brings home a feeling of comfort and warmth.

One can go on commenting on the problems of translation or the deliberations of the conference. What marks this conference off from others, however, is the resolution to establish a National Centre for Translation that would champion the cause. This, and the existence of a magazine, published in London and devoted to modern Arabic literature, are the two main conclusions one might draw.

The magazine is called Banipal, and takes its same from Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria and patron of the arts whose outstanding achievement was to assemble in Noneveh, from all over the empire, the first systematically organised library in the Ancient Middle East. Eight issues of the magazine have appeared, containing articles about Algerian, Moroccan, Egyptian, Iraqi and other Arabic literatures. It also published translations of short stories and poems by leading Arab writers. Towards the end of the conference Margaret Obank, the editor-in-chief, concluded an agreement to publish an issue devoted wholly to modern Egyptian literature.

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