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TRANSLATION

Translation unlocks doors that might otherwise remain closed, but the translator must remain true to the original. With technical works, he must be familiar with the specialty. In translating literature he must beware of the possibility of loss in smoothing over that which is alien or shocking.

FOR THE WRITER, translation is a challenge and an apprenticeship in his own language. Translating a work written in a foreign language, the mother tongue of an author, enables the translator to discover not only the difficulties and complexities of the work in question but, in addition and even more important, the subtleties, the lights and shadings, of the language he himself employs. This is only one dimension of translation, for there are several levels of translation just as there are several levels of language.

I can only pass quickly over the question of simultaneous translation, although its practice is becoming increasingly widespread, especially in a country like Canada. I am always left breathless by the speed with which such a translator grasps speech in a foreign language and transmits it in a second language, usually his own. It is of course impossible for him to grasp the subtlety of a phrase or the convolutions of a thought. The simultaneous translator is involved in a race; one is impressed chiefly by the agility of the mechanism, a gymnastics of the mind. This movement back and forth, the rapid shifting from one world to another, allows us to put our finger on the mechanism of translation. It is first of all a displacement, the transmission of information. If this information is essentially technical or scientific in nature, and if it appertains to a clearly defined specialty, the first priority for the translator is that he should know the particular technology, science, or specialty, the second that he possess sufficient knowledge of his own as well as of the other language.

To translate a pharmacopoeia requires first a respectable knowledge of pharmacology and then of the two languages. Otherwise the translator is dealing with material which he does not understand in either language, which happens all too frequently, it must be said, especially in technical work. In material of this sort, mistranslation is unpardonable, since it does not admit of more than one interpretation. A translation is thus either correct or false. So it can be said that the best translators of books in economics are economists, of philosophical books philosophers, and of sociological works sociologists.

It is obvious that philosophers, economists, and sociologists prefer to work at their own research than to devote their energies to translation. As translation in these fields, particularly the scientific and the technical, is becoming increasingly important, it is to be hoped that translators will make themselves specialists in particular fields. There are indications of a trend in this direction and it is essential that it increase.

Translation of literary work is a different matter. Here what has to be transmitted is not knowledge or information but a mind, a civilization, a universe. The translator has his own mind, his own civilization, and universe. He is endeavouring to capture a mind, a universe, and a civilization that are different, sometimes at the antipodes from his own, and make it comprehensible to those for whom he intends his translation. The temptation is always great to remove all strangeness and every trace of oddity from the text, to tone down everything about it that is shocking, even perhaps jarring – the very basis of its singularity. In this way the work is tamed and made readily acceptable, without grating upon ears habituated to their own sounds and minds that consider their own traditions and practices to be verities.

The translator thus acts as a servant to his own community by offering it a text which it can comprehend and, above all, accept. He is not even aware that he is being false to the original work since, himself a member of his community, he considers it normal to eliminate the shocking and the jarring and to trim away the useless excesses of a mind that has not yet seen the light, has not yet yielded to civilization – in this case his own.

I recently examined a number of translations of the Old Testament and the Koran into English and French. The Old Testament is rooted in a particular time and space. The Hebrew in which it was written remained for centuries a language that was not spoken, was used only for prayer. It became a spiritual language. As the Old Testament was considered to be one of the components of Christian doctrine, it was essential that translations made of it should not contradict or collide with Christian views, whence came a need to interpret certain words and passages, to modify them slightly when required, to change not only their spirit but their meaning to suit a different attitude, that of a West that was impermeable, by reason of its history and its geography, to certain dimensions of the Semitic universe.

There are even different translations for the various denominations: a Catholic translation, a Protestant translation. All are faithful in their manner, faithful above all to those for whom the translations were intended. It is sufficient to cite a single instance, an essential one: the name given to God. This goes all the way from interpretation to adaptation to mistranslation. Only when Hebrew had once more become a spoken language, when new biblical research had been carried out, and, most fundamental, when Christians had begun to accept the plurality of the world and the diversity of religious thought, was the need felt to return to the source and new translations were undertaken. One of the most recent translations of the Old Testament into French, that of André Chouraqui, is quite unlike any that preceded it. Chouraqui, a Jew of Eastern origin, worked from within the community in which the work originated and remained faithful to its traditions. He restored the characterizations of the original without too much attention to the exigencies of the French language and its habits of logic and coherence. His translation strains the language and by this means renews it. The translation offers to the interested reader a text that has not been made to conform to the French language or spirit. To some it would seem alien and peculiar, to others intemporal and incandescent.

The case of the Koran is different since it entered Europe only as the expression of the faith of a conqueror who was finally expelled. It may seem strange that despite their secular presence in Spain, Bulgaria, Greece, and many other European countries, all that the Muslims – Moors, then Turks – gave Europe of their religion was the image of a faith, a bond, and a coherence in the service of a devastation and conquest that Christianity in all its forms – Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox – struggled for centuries to overcome. Several translations of the Koran exist but few have found readers the circle of specialists. Others who venture upon it find the text banal and are unable to comprehend the influence it exercises upon hundreds of millions of believers.

It need not be added that Arab culture as a whole, despite Arab presence, has entered consciousness only in a few more or less superficial manifestations and phenomena.

Two works have enjoyed great popularity for reasons that only confirm the distance separating the two universes – a distance they have done nothing to breach. These are *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*. Of all the poets of the Middle East, whether writing in Arabic or Persian, Khayyam is the best known in the West. This reputation rests upon a misapprehension. The minor English poet, Fitzgerald, used Khayyam's work very loosely as a basis for popular English poetry with a strong perfume of the Oriental. The result is not properly speaking translation, but free adaptation. Khayyam's name merely authenticated its exoticism. This was a device like any other and it had the advantage of succeeding. The misapprehension persists and specialists in Persian poetry have difficulty restoring to Omar Khayyam his real identity.

Gibran's case is more complex. An Arabic-speaking Christian, he left his native Lebanon to settle in Boston. His first published poetry was written in Arabic. His religion and, above all, his knowledge of the West gave him a freedom that, allied with his talent and his poetic power, sent a new wind blowing through Arabic poetry. For the second part of his work he adopted English. But for all the American students who read *The Prophet*, Gibran is the mystic poet come from afar. Thus this human hinge is for Westerners the Oriental and for Easterners an Occidental. The circumstances of his life made it possible for him to know both universes and, without going so far as to achieve a synthesis between them, he was able to live in both simultaneously.

Whenever a spiritual universe and a civilization are involved, translation can only make these available to another universe and another civilization. It merely unlocks a door that may remain closed if no one wishes to cross the threshold. Of all the world's playwrights, Shakespeare is unquestionably the most widely translated and the most popular. It is clear that he owes this primarily to his genius. The material he offers is of such richness that even stripped of the grandeur of his poetry it retains its power. None of the many translations is entirely satisfactory; there is always some facet or dimension missing. In French, for instance, there is no standard translation. Each generation has its own, and from time to time producers find it necessary to commission new translations that may finally meet their expectations. It may seem strange that among translators of French authors there are few of Molière and almost none of Corneille and Racine. The power of these writers, of the last two in particular, is intimately linked to language. The

universe of Racine and Corneille is simply not transferable. In this lies the greatest challenge of translation.

As long as language is merely a vehicle of information, translation presents only one problem, that it be undertaken by a good translator. But when a world must be transposed, a civilization transplanted, and a universe made accessible, translation is only one step and one component in a work of transposition that goes beyond language. The most obvious example of this is poetry. Here a translation can only be a quite new poem, the work usually of a poet of the language of translation. Otherwise the result is only a fleshless skeleton.

In countries where two languages live in more or less amicable proximity, translation is paradoxically both a necessity and a risk. It is a necessity because each group must have access to all political, scientific, social, and cultural information in its own language. However, proximity brings risk of promiscuity. A language is not only a conveyer of information but the product, the expression, and the principal vector of a universe and a civilization. If this language is not certain of its limits and its boundaries, there is danger that it may blur the definition of the universe it should express. Imprecision of language then becomes imprecision of thought. Encounters between civilizations are not brought about by haziness and imprecision but by a clear sense of bounds and limits that permits freedom and openness of exchange.

Study of a second language is an effective means of preserving one's own language. It enables one to be forewarned against discrete, almost imperceptible borrowings. Canadians transformed two civilizations that came to them from France and Great Britain. Do they still plough the same furrow? Do they extend these traditions? The technological civilization of North America shakes the *données* of these questions. Furthermore, in the relationship between the languages political maladies are embedded and within each of the languages aspects of these maladies can be seen.

Translation does not solve political problems. But whatever the choices and options of individual Canadians, it is important that every citizen have access in his own language to all the information necessary to his life in his community. Translation can do more – it opens the door of one civilization to the other. If this translation is carried out, not with the intention of effecting a syncretism but simply as the offering of one culture to the other in its autonomy and its integrity, then it can establish a real exchange. As the bearer of one culture and with access to another, every Canadian can become, potentially, a translator. Among these translators there will be technicians, men of talent, and artists. Each will be able to take up one level of translation. It is possible to hope that the number of artists will increase with time and that among them there will be more and more transmitters of culture and civilization. It will perhaps then be discovered that the art of translation is also the art of living in a world of diversity and exchange.

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