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introduction: No problem is as consubstantial
why with literature and its modest
translation mystery as the one posed by
translation. translation.
matters —JORGE LUIS BORGES,
“Las versiones homéricas”

To introduce these essays, I thought it would be useful to pass along some incidental information about my background and the circumstances that led me, however indirectly, to a career in translation.

When I was young—a high school student—it was not my intention to be a translator. I knew I wanted to learn languages and had a vague idea about being an interpreter. (I wasn't quite sure what the difference between the two professions was, but interpreting sounded more exciting; it suggested travel, exotic places, important events, world-shaking conferences at the United Nations.) As an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, I changed direction and decided my ambition was to be a literary critic and scholar, even though, operating under the mistaken assumption that apparently simple poetry was simple to translate, I do recall submitting a few poems by Juan Ramón Jiménez and, if I remember correctly, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, to the campus literary magazine. I embarked on an academic career, served my time in several graduate schools, and moved from a focus on medieval and baroque

peninsular verse, first the Galician-Portuguese love lyrics and then the sonnets of Francisco de Quevedo, to contemporary Latin American poetry, a change brought about by my first reading of works by Pablo Neruda, and soon after that César Vallejo. (I came on this stunning poetry fairly late in my student career: I have no memory of reading any Latin American literature written after the Mexican Revolution until I made the cross-country trek to Berkeley.) Neruda's *Residencia en la tierra* in particular was a revelation that altered radically the professional direction I followed and actually changed the tenor of my life. It elucidated for me, as if for the first time, the possibilities of poetry in a contemporary environment. Above all, it underscored the central position of Latin America in the literature of the world, its impact made possible and even more telling by means of translation.

I began teaching while I was a graduate student, and then continued giving classes full-time when I moved back east and enrolled in New York University. During most of this time I was thinking more about my dissertation than about translation. But one day Ronald Christ, a friend who edited the magazine *Review*, the publication of the organization once called the Center for Inter-American Relations and now known as the Americas Society, asked me to translate a story by the Argentine Macedonio Fernández, a writer of the generation just before Borges. I said I was a critic, not a translator, and he said that

might be true, but he thought I could do a good job with the piece. I agreed to translate it, more out of curiosity about its wildly eccentric author and the process of translation than for any other reason. I discovered to my surprise that I not only enjoyed the work more than I had imagined but could do it at home, an arrangement that seemed very attractive then, and still does.

My translation of Macedonio's "The Surgery of Psychic Removal" was published in *Review* in 1973. From that time on, I moonlighted as a translator of poetry and fiction in a fairly regular way while I sunlighted as a college instructor until 1990, when I left teaching to devote myself full-time to translation. I have been a visiting professor several times since then, and when I am not teaching I miss being in a classroom and talking to students, but my main concentration and professional focus have been on translation. And I have been very fortunate: I have liked, and often loved, practically every piece of writing I have brought over into English, and after all these years I still find the work intriguing, mysterious, and endlessly challenging.

Why translation matters: the subject is so huge, so complex, and so dear to my heart that I have decided to begin my approach to it by answering the implicit question with another question, using the technique of query-as-response—a tradi-

tional, perhaps time-honored method of indicating the almost impenetrable difficulty of a subject, and certainly, as every pedagogue knows, a good way to delay and even confound the questioner until you can think of an acceptable answer that has at least a glimmer of coherence. My variation on that traditional ploy consists of breaking the question into still smaller components in order to refocus the inquiry and ask not only why translation matters, but also whether it matters at all, and if in fact it does have importance, who exactly cares about it. The answers that emerge may really depend on how the questions are formulated: Why, for example, does translation matter to translators, authors, and readers? Why does it not matter to most publishers and book reviewers? What is its relevance to the literary tradition in any number of languages? What is its contribution to the civilized life of the world? My attempt to devise a response to these various elements constitutes a kind of preliminary appraisal of some of the thorny, ongoing, apparently never-to-be-resolved problems that surround the question of literary translation, beginning with the old chestnut of whether it is possible at all, and moving on to what it actually does, and what its proper place in the universe of literature should be.

I believe that serious professional translators, often in private, think of themselves—forgive me, I mean ourselves—as writers,

no matter what else may cross our minds when we ponder the work we do, and I also believe we are correct to do so. Is this sheer presumption, a heady kind of immodesty on our part? What exactly do we literary translators do to justify the notion that the term “writer” actually applies to us? Aren’t we simply the humble, anonymous handmaids-and-men of literature, the grateful, ever-obsequious servants of the publishing industry? In the most resounding yet decorous terms I can muster, the answer is no, for the most fundamental description of what translators do is that we write—or perhaps rewrite—in language B a work of literature originally composed in language A, hoping that readers of the second language—I mean, of course, readers of the translation—will perceive the text, emotionally and artistically, in a manner that parallels and corresponds to the esthetic experience of its first readers. This is the translator’s grand ambition. Good translations approach that purpose. Bad translations never leave the starting line.

As a first step toward accomplishing so exemplary an end, translators need to develop a keen sense of style in both languages, honing and expanding our critical awareness of the emotional impact of words, the social aura that surrounds them, the setting and mood that informs them, the atmosphere they create. We struggle to sharpen and elaborate our perception of the connotations and implications behind basic denotative meaning in a process not dissimilar to the efforts writers

make to increase their familiarity with and competence in a given literary idiom.

Writing, like any other artistic practice, is a vocation that calls to deep, resonating parts of our psyches; it is not something translators or writers can be dissuaded from doing or would abandon easily. It seems strikingly paradoxical, but although translators obviously are writing someone else's work, there is no shame or subterfuge in this despite the peculiar disparagement and continual undervaluing of what we do by some publishers and many reviewers.

As William Carlos Williams said in a letter written in 1940 to the art critic and poet Nicolas Calas (and my thanks to Jonathan Cohen, the scholar of inter-American literature, for sharing the quotation with me):

If I do original work all well and good. But if I can say it (the matter of form I mean) by translating the work of others that also is valuable. What difference does it make?

The undeniable reality is that the work becomes the translator's (while simultaneously and mysteriously somehow remaining the work of the original author) as we transmute it into a second language. Perhaps *transmute* is the wrong verb; what we do is not an act of magic, like altering base metals into precious ones, but the result of a series of creative decisions and imaginative acts of criticism. In the process of translating, we endeavor

to hear the first version of the work as profoundly and completely as possible, struggling to discover the linguistic charge, the structural rhythms, the subtle implications, the complexities of meaning and suggestion in vocabulary and phrasing, and the ambient, cultural inferences and conclusions these tonalities allow us to extrapolate. This is a kind of reading as deep as any encounter with a literary text can be.

For example, consider fiction. Dialogue contains often nuanced though sometimes egregious indications of the class, status, and education of the characters, not to mention their intelligence and emotional state; significant intentions and sonorities abound in the narration and in the descriptive portions of the work; there may be elements of irony or satire; the rhythm of the prose (long, flowing periods or short, crisp phrases) and the tone of the writing (colloquialisms, elevated diction, pomposities, slang, elegance, substandard usage) are pivotal stylistic devices, and it is incumbent upon the translator to apprehend the ways in which these instrumentalities further the purposes of the fiction, the revelation of character, the progress of the action.

To varying degrees, all attentive readers do this, consciously or unconsciously. Certainly students and teachers of literature attempt to achieve this kind of profound analysis in every paper they write, every lecture they give. How, then, does the endeavor of the translator differ from that of any careful reader,

not to mention harried students and their equally hard-pressed instructors? The unique factor in the experience of translators is that we not only are listeners to the text, hearing the author's voice in the mind's ear, but speakers of a second text—the translated work—who repeat what we have heard, though in another language, a language with its own literary tradition, its own cultural accretions, its own lexicon and syntax, its own historical experience, all of which must be treated with as much respect, esteem, and appreciation as we bring to the language of the original writer. Our purpose is to re-create as far as possible, within the alien system of a second language, all the characteristics, vagaries, quirks, and stylistic peculiarities of the work we are translating. And we do this by analogy—that is, by finding comparable, not identical, characteristics, vagaries, quirks, and stylistic peculiarities in the second language. Repeating the work in any other way—for example, by succumbing to the literalist fallacy and attempting to duplicate the text in another language, following a pattern of word-for-word transcription—would lead not to a translation but to a grotesque variation on Borges's Pierre Menard, who rewrites his own *Don Quixote* that coincides word for word with Cervantes' original, though it is considered superior to the original because of its modernity. Furthermore, a mindless, literalist translation would constitute a serious breach of contract. There isn't a self-respecting publisher in the world who would not reject a manuscript framed

in this way. It is not acceptable, readable, or faithful, as the letters of agreement demand, though it certainly may have its own perverse originality.

To cite Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Task of the Translator,”

No translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. . . . For just as the tenor and significance of the great works of literature undergo a complete transformation over the centuries, the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well. While a poet’s words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal. Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own. (74–75)

And as Ralph Manheim, the great translator from German, so famously said, translators are like actors who speak the lines as the author would if the author could speak English. As one would expect from so gifted a practitioner of the art, Manheim’s observation on translation is wonderfully insightful and revelatory. Whatever else it may be, translation in Manheim’s formulation is a kind of interpretive performance, bearing the same relationship to the original text as the actor’s work does to the script, the performing musician’s to the composition. This

image of performance may account for the fact that, surprisingly enough, I always seem to conceive of and discuss the translating process as essentially auditory, something immediately available to other people, as opposed to a silent, solitary process. I think of the author's voice and the sound of the text, then of my obligation to hear both as clearly and profoundly as possible, and finally of my equally pressing need to speak the piece in a second language. Especially in the translation of poetry, which I discuss at greater length in chapter 3, this practice is not purely metaphorical. It is, instead, an integral part of my actual approach to the interpretation of a poem in Spanish and its rendering into English. In my case, the work tends to be done *viva voce*.

We read translations all the time, but of all the interpretive arts, it is fascinating and puzzling to realize that only translation has to fend off the insidious, damaging question of whether or not it is, can be, or should be possible. It would never occur to anyone to ask whether it is feasible for an actor to perform a dramatic role or a musician to interpret a piece of music. Of course it is feasible, just as it is possible for a translator to rewrite a work of literature in another language. Can it be done well? I think so, as do my translating colleagues, but there are other, more antipathetic opinions. Yet even the most virulent, mean-spirited critic reluctantly admits on occasion that some few

decent translations do appear from time to time. And the very concept of world literature as a discipline fit for academic study depends on the availability of translations. Translation occupies a central and prominent position in the conceptualization of a universal, enlightened civilization, and, no small accomplishment, it almost defines the European Renaissance. The “re-birth” we all have studied at one time or another began as the translation into Latin and then the vernacular languages of the ancient Greek philosophy and science that had been lost to Christian Europe for centuries. Poets of the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries—for example, the Spaniards Garcilaso de la Vega and Fray Luis de León—routinely translated and adapted classical and then Italian works, and these versions of Horace or Virgil or Petrarch were included as a matter of course in collections of their original poems.

Translation is crucial to our sense of ourselves as serious readers, and as literate, educated men and women we would find the absence of translations to read and study inconceivable. There are roughly six thousand extant languages in the world. Let us hypothesize that approximately one thousand of them are written. Not even the most gifted linguist could read complex literary texts in one thousand languages. We tend to be in awe of the few people who can read even ten languages well, and it clearly is an astonishing feat, although we have to remember

that if there were no translations, even those multilingual prodigies would be deprived of any encounter with works written in the 990 tongues they don't know. If this is true for the linguistically gifted, imagine the impact that the disappearance of translations would have on the rest of us. Translation expands our ability to explore through literature the thoughts and feelings of people from another society or another time. It permits us to savor the transformation of the foreign into the familiar and for a brief time to live outside our own skins, our own preconceptions and misconceptions. It expands and deepens our world, our consciousness, in countless, indescribable ways.

The translation of their works is also of critical importance to writers around the world, promising them a significant increase in readership. One of the many reasons writers write—though certainly not the only one—is to communicate with and affect as many people as possible. Translation expands that number exponentially, allowing more and more readers to be touched by an author's work. For writers whose first language is limited in terms of how many people speak it, translation is indispensable for achieving an audience of consequential size. For those whose first language is spoken by millions, though a decisive number of them may be illiterate or so impoverished that buying books is not an option, translation is also an imperative. It is one of the preposterous ironies of our current literary situation

that despite the pitifully low number of translations published each year in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the rest of the English-speaking world compared, say, with the industrialized nations of western Europe or Latin America, the English-language market is the one most writers and their agents crave for their books. English is the world's lingua franca in commerce, technology, and diplomacy, and it tends to be spoken in places where literacy is prevalent and people are prosperous enough to purchase books, even though the number of book buyers seems to decrease steadily. Some years ago Philip Roth estimated that there are four thousand people in the United States who buy books, and he went on to say that once you have sold your work to them and the libraries, your run is essentially ended. On optimistic days, I assume Roth was being characteristically sardonic. At other times, I am not so sure.

One of the double-edged canards about the Nobel Prize is that no writer who has not been translated into English can hope even to be considered for the prize in literature, because English is the one language all the judges can read. This notion actually seems to be true for the use of the book in other media, such as film. A book that has not been translated into English has little likelihood of ever being made into a widely distributed movie.

Translation affects creative artists in another, perhaps less

obvious but much more important and extraordinarily consequential way—one that goes far beyond questions of financial reward, no matter how significant that may be. As Walter Benjamin indicates in the passage cited earlier, literary translation infuses a language with influences, alterations, and combinations that would not have been possible without the presence of translated foreign literary styles and perceptions, the material significance and heft of literature that lies outside the territory of the purely monolingual. In other words, the influence of translated literature has a revivifying and expansive effect on what is hideously called the “target language,” the language into which the text is translated.

In 1964 Robert Bly wrote an essay entitled “The Surprise of Neruda,” in which he speaks directly to this issue:

We tend to associate the modern imagination with the jerky imagination, which starts forward, stops, turns around, switches from subject to subject. In Neruda’s poems, the imagination drives forward, joining the entire poem in a rising flow of imaginative energy. . . . He is a new kind of creature moving about under the surface of everything.

Moving under the earth, he knows everything from the bottom up (which is the right way to learn the nature of a thing) and therefore is never at a loss for its name. Compared to him, the American poet resembles a blind man moving about above the ground from tree to tree, from house to house, feeling each thing for a long time, and then calling out “house,” when we already know it’s a house. (quoted in Cohen, 28)

The impact of the kind of artistic discovery that translation enables is profoundly important to the health and vitality of any language and any literature. It may be one of the reasons that histories of national literatures so often seem to exclude supremely significant connections among writers. “National literature” is a narrowing, confining concept based on the distinction between native and foreign, which is certainly a valid and useful differentiation in some areas and under certain circumstances, but in writing it is obviated by translation, which dedicates itself to denying and negating the impact of divine punishment for the construction of the Tower of Babel, or at least to overcoming its worst divisive effects. Translation asserts the possibility of a coherent, unified experience of literature in the world’s multiplicity of languages. At the same time, translation celebrates the differences among languages and the many varieties of human experience and perception they can express. I do not believe this is a contradiction. Rather, it testifies to the comprehensive, inclusive embrace of both literature and translation.

One example among many of the fruitful exchange among languages brought about by translation is the ongoing connection between William Faulkner and Gabriel García Márquez. When he was a young man, García Márquez had an insatiable appetite for Faulkner’s fiction and devoured his novels in Spanish translations, along with the books of many other authors

writing in other languages. Over the years he has spoken often of Faulkner as his favorite English-language author—the subject of a long conversation between the Colombian and former president Bill Clinton (who had claimed that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was the greatest novel of the past fifty years and called it his favorite work of fiction) at a dinner in William Styron’s house on Martha’s Vineyard in the summer of 1995. Carlos Fuentes was also present, and when he said that his favorite book was *Absalom, Absalom*, Clinton stood and recited from memory part of Benjy’s monologue from *The Sound and the Fury*.

In *Living to Tell the Tale*, García Márquez’s reading of *Light in August* runs like a leitmotif through his narrative of the trip he makes with his mother to sell the family house in Aracataca: “I already had read, in translation, and in borrowed editions, all the books I would have needed to learn the novelist’s craft. . . . William Faulkner was the most faithful of my tutelary demons” (4, 6). Then he goes on to say: “I stayed in my room to read . . . books I obtained by chance and luck. . . . These [were] like bread warm from the oven, printed in Buenos Aires in new translations after the long hiatus in publishing because of the Second World War. In this way I discovered, to my good fortune, the already very-much-discovered Jorge Luis Borges, D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene and Gilbert Chesterton, William Irish and Katherine Mansfield,

and many others” (245–246). Of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* he writes: “It not only was the discovery of a genuine world that I never suspected inside me, but it also provided invaluable technical help to me in freeing language and in handling time and structures in my books” (247). And finally, this is how he describes the effect of reading Kafka for the first time: “I never again slept with my former serenity. The book was Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, in the false translation by Borges published by Losada in Buenos Aires, that determined a new direction for my life from its first line, which today is one of the great devices in world literature” (249). He may have called the translation “false” because, as he describes what he learned from Borges, all an author had to do was to write something for it to be true. In any event, in these brief passages, this remarkable novelist memorably evokes the breadth and vividness of a young writer’s education in the craft of writing fiction, an initiation that would not have been possible without the existence of literary translations. These books, and all the other books he read, had a defining impact on his formation as a writer and allowed him to read as an apprentice to authors who in fact served as long-distance mentors.

Someone once called Faulkner the best-known Latin American writer in English, a description that may be more than a mere witticism. He seems to have inherited and then transferred into

English the expansive Cervantean style that has had so profound an influence, both positive and negative, on all subsequent Spanish-language writers. Moreover, Cervantes created the form and shape of modern fiction, a genre transformation of fundamental importance regardless of the fiction writer's language. The development of the novel in Europe, especially in eighteenth-century England and in the seminal work of Henry Fielding, grew directly out of the model of *Don Quixote*, which was translated almost immediately after publication. Thomas Shelton's English version, published in 1611, was the first translation into any language of the first part of Cervantes' novel, which appeared in 1605. The speculation that Shakespeare intended to write a play based on the adventures of Cardenio, the protagonist of one of the interpolated narratives in the first part of *Don Quixote*, or actually did write the play, though it unfortunately has been lost, becomes especially intriguing for our purposes because of the presence and success of Shelton's translation in England, which initiated the long, multifaceted history of Cervantes' influence on the growth of the novel, on the way novelists write, and certainly on the way Faulkner wrote.

There is no question that in the mid-twentieth century, Faulkner was the most important contemporary English-language writer in Latin America. His sonorous, eloquent, baroque style with its Cervantean resonances felt familiar to

Spanish-speaking readers, but I believe that even more decisive for his profound importance to the development of the Latin American novel, above all to the literary phenomenon called the Boom, was Faulkner's mythic, megahistorical, multigenerational vision of the land and the people who live on it. Not only García Márquez but Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and a host of other contemporary Latin American novelists owe a serious debt to Faulkner (and certainly to Cervantes). None of this rich literary cross-fertilization could have happened if Cervantes, Faulkner, and so many others had never been translated.

By the same token, it is impossible to conceive of the contemporary novel in English without taking García Márquez into account (not to mention Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar). The influence of García Márquez's writing—presumably in translation, as Faulkner's influence in Latin America undoubtedly took place for the most part in Spanish—is evident in a gamut of prominent writers like Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, Don de Lillo, and Michael Chabon, to name only a few. It is wonderful to contemplate, isn't it: the freedom García Márquez discovered in Joyce, and the structural and technical lessons he learned from him and from Faulkner, have been passed on to a younger generation of English-language fiction writers through the translated impact of the Colombian's writing. The innovative process of discovery that has allowed major writers to flex authorial muscles beyond the limitations of a

single language and a single literary tradition would not have been possible without access to translated books. Translation is, in fact, a powerful, pervasive force that broadens and deepens a writer's perception of style, technique, and structure by allowing him or her to enter literary worlds not necessarily found in one national or linguistic tradition. Far beyond essentially pernicious anxieties of influence, writers learn their craft from one another, just as painters and musicians do. The days of direct apprenticeship are over, for the most part, except, of course, in formal, academic settings (creative writing programs, studio courses, or conservatory study, for example), but artists can find mentors in other ways. The more books from more places that are available to fledgling authors, the greater the potential flow of creative influence, the more irresistible the spark that ignites literary imaginations. Translation plays an inimitable, essential part in the expansion of literary horizons through multilingual fertilization. A worldwide community of writers would be inconceivable without it.

Goethe believed that a literature exhausts itself and its resources become vitiated if it closes itself off to the influences and contributions of other literatures. Not only literature but language itself thrives as it makes connections with other languages. The result of the linguistic infusion of new means of expression is an expansion of vocabulary, evocative potentiality, and structural experimentation. In other words, the broadening

of horizons that comes with translation does not affect only readers, speakers, and writers of a language, but the very nature of the language itself. The more a language embraces infusions and transfusions of new elements and foreign turns of phrase, the larger, more forceful, and more flexible it becomes as an expressive medium. How sad to contemplate the efforts of know-nothing governments and exclusionary social movements to first invent and then foster the mythical “purity” of a language by barring the use of any others within a national territory. The language they wish to preserve would eventually be worn away, eroded and impoverished by a lack of access to new and unfamiliar means of expression and communication, if it were not for irresistible, inevitable surges of enriching intercultural and multilinguistic currents across the world.

At the center of discussions of books and literature is the reader, a figure frequently alluded to in broad generalities, although in that sense there is no reader, there are only readers, individuals who respond to a text in idiosyncratic, eccentric, and thoroughly unpredictable ways. By the same token, we probably should avoid this kind of unitary abstraction when referring en masse to writers, translators, publishers, and critics, but the temptation to do so is difficult to resist, especially when we engage in general discussions of the contemporary state of the book.

For those of us who take literature very seriously, picking up a work of fiction is the start of an adventure comparable in anticipatory excitement to what I imagine is felt by an athlete warming up for a competition, a mountain climber preparing for the ascent: it is the beginning of a process whose outcome is unknown, one that promises the thrill and elation of success but may as easily end in bitter disappointment. Committed readers realize at a certain point that literature is where we have learned a good part of the little we know about living. Certainly we learn from vital experience, but experience can be direct or vicarious, and the most wide-ranging, most profound kind of vicarious experience I know of is the one we encounter in works of literature. In English-language fiction, consider the obscure modes of behavior and unpredictable attitudes contained in the subtle revelations of Henry James or Edith Wharton, the stunning aperçus of Philip Roth, the bitterness of loss in Ernest Hemingway, the world-weary sophistication of Graham Greene, the dazzling experimentation and acute sensitivity to character of James Joyce or Virginia Woolf. Then remember the astonishment of the utterly alien and new that washed over you the first time you read a novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky or became aware of the extraordinary precision of Gustave Flaubert's observations, the profundity of Thomas Mann's sense of history and its not always loving embrace of individuals, the imaginative menace of José Saramago's hyperrealism, the piercing,

ironic calamities of W. G. Sebald's chronicles. I never have forgotten my adolescent self discovering nineteenth-century Russian and French novelists: the world seemed to grow large, expanding like an unbreakable balloon; it became broader and deeper as I contemplated characters more diverse and unpredictable than anything I could have imagined on my own. Surely writers like Stendhal and Balzac, Gogol and Tolstoy, created entire galaxies in their writing. It is unthinkable, almost unbearable to contemplate the possibility of being deprived of those universes because one does not know French and Russian well enough to read their books.

Reading novels first in English and in translation, and later in Spanish (and occasionally in one or two other Romance languages), was how I confirmed for myself the actuality of the unforeseeable, the omnipresence of the unimaginable, the prevailing variance and dissimilarity that dominate human affairs, and then learned—or at least was exposed to—a handful of profoundly important ways to cope with the shifting ground. Over the years, as I have continued to explore the world of fiction, the kind of perception that grows out of and is nourished by reading keeps expanding until it spills over into ordinary, concrete life. Haven't you thought on more than one occasion that in a kind of authorial prescience on the part of some writers, or with a Borgesian creation of fictional realities within the confines of a physical, concrete actuality, certain

scenes and conversations on the street, in restaurants, or on trains come right out of novels by Turgenev or Kafka or Grass? And haven't you realized with a start that whatever ways you may have devised for responding to those situations probably come from the same novels too?

Imagine how bereft we would be if the only fictional worlds we could explore, the only vicarious literary experiences we could have, were those written in languages we read easily. The deprivation would be indescribable. Depending on your linguistic accomplishments, this would mean you might never have the opportunity to read Homer or Sophocles or Sappho, Catullus or Virgil, Dante or Petrarch or Leopardi, Cervantes or Lope or Quevedo, Ronsard or Rabelais or Verlaine, Tolstoy or Chekhov, Goethe or Heine: even a cursory list of awe-inspiring writers is practically endless, though I have not even left western Europe or gone past the nineteenth century to compile it. Then try to imagine never experiencing any literature written in the countless other languages you may not know: in my case, these would include Polish, Czech, German, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Russian, and all the myriad languages of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. The mere idea creates a prospect that is intolerably, inconceivably bleak.

Putting to the side for a moment the dire state of publishing today or the lamentable tendency of too many publishers to

treat translators cavalierly or dismiss them as irrelevant, the fact is that many readers tend to take translation so much for granted that it is no wonder translators are so frequently ignored. We seem to be a familiar part of the natural landscape—so customary and commonplace that we run the risk of becoming invisible. This may be why many university English departments often declare a monopoly on the teaching of what they choose to call world literature or humanities, putting together lists of readings that include a large number of works in translation. I cannot quarrel with the inclusion of translations on any reading list, yet in the process foreign-language departments and their teachers of literature, the ones with real expertise in the works studied, are effectively snubbed. I have never been able to find the logic or coherence in that. Is there someone on a curriculum committee somewhere who does not know or cannot tell the difference between works in English and works in translation? The best face I can put on it is that the ironic disconnect may be an academic trait.

Our world as dedicated readers depends on the availability of translated works, classical and contemporary, yet in English-speaking nations, major commercial publishers are strangely resistant to publishing them. The sad statistics indicate that in the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, only two to three percent of books published each year are literary

translations. This is not the universal nature of the translating beast: in western Europe, in countries like France or Germany, Italy or Spain, and in Latin America, the number is anywhere from twenty-five to forty percent. I don't know how to account for this, but the recalcitrance of the English-language publishing industry seems unshakeable and immutable. For most houses, translated works are not of compelling interest regardless of the wider significance readers and writers may find in them. Frequently, in fact, translations are actively discouraged. They can be commercially successful (think of the cachet enjoyed in this country by *The Name of the Rose*; *Beowulf*; *Don Quixote*; anything by Roberto Bolaño), and still the majority of American and British publishers resist the very idea of translation and persistently hold the line against the presence of too many translated works in their catalogues. Some years ago, to my most profound consternation, I was told by a senior editor at a prestigious house that he could not even consider taking on another translation since he already had two on his list.

A persistent explanation for the phenomenon of translation resistance—at least, the one I have heard most often—is that English-language readers are put off by translations (the presumptive reason, incidentally, for publishers' longtime and forever-mindless reluctance to put the translator's name, in legible size, on the cover of a book that has been brought over into a second language). This is another of those publishing shib-

boleths presented as divine truth, but it really doesn't make sense to me. The market-driven publishing industry seems to be caught up in a chicken-and-egg conundrum: is a limited readership for translations the reason so few are published in the Anglophone world, or is that readership limited because English-language publishers provide their readers with so few translations, especially of works by younger writers in languages thought of as exotic (a term applied to languages from anywhere but western Europe). These amazing statistics regarding the embarrassingly low percentage of translations in the English-speaking world represent or express a new kind of iron curtain that we have constructed around ourselves, to our detriment and to the detriment of literature in general. I realize that the number of readers of literature is on the decline, and that serious, dedicated editors face real difficulties in bringing good books to the marketplace. It often seems, however, that translations and the people who create them can become too easy a target for a beleaguered industry, although shortchanging translators and ignoring translation in no way helps to solve the grave problem of a reduced readership.

Reviewers seem to care about translation even less than publishers do. I admit to a somewhat jaundiced attitude toward most book reviewers. In overwhelming numbers they tend not to speak substantively about translation or its practitioners,

even when the book they are reviewing is a translated work. Their omissions and distortions are extraordinary, and certainly as wrongheaded as the publishers' pretense that the translator's name not only is of no importance but is likely to be a serious impediment to the success of the book. A very well-known figure in the literary world who regularly reviewed for an acclaimed periodical once defended the omission of any mention of the translation in his piece on a translated novel by stating that since he did not know the language of the original, there was nothing he can say about the translated version. By implication, he was actually saying that the purpose of any such discussion in a review is to perform an accuracy check, which is hardly the point, since any competent translator would already have made countless checks for accuracy before the book ever reached the publisher's hands.

Unlike many publications that do not even mention the translator's name, however, some apparently require their writers to indicate somewhere in the review that the book under consideration has been translated from another language, and with some few outstanding exceptions, this burdensome necessity is taken care of with a single dismissive and uninformative adverb paired with the verb "translated." This is the origin of that perennial favorite "ably," but I wonder how reviewers know even that much. It usually is clear from the review that, like the writer mentioned in the previous paragraph, most

of them do not read the original language, and sometimes I doubt that they have even read the translation. This deadly shallowness leads me to ask: “ably” compared with what? By an act of prestidigitation that verges on the miraculous, however, they often discuss the style and language of the book as if they were discussing the language of the original writer, as if the work of the translator—the work they are reviewing—were not the connection that has allowed them to read the book in the first place. Remarkable, isn’t it? Do they think translations consist of a magical kind of tracing paper placed over the original text? Are they really convinced that the contribution of the translator is a merely rote mechanical exercise on that miraculous tracing paper, like the wondrous interlinear translations of second-year language students?

Intrinsic to the concept of a translator’s fidelity to the effect and impact of the original is making the second version of the work as close to the first writer’s intention as possible. A good translator’s devotion to that goal is unwavering. But what never should be forgotten or overlooked is the obvious fact that what we read in a translation is the translator’s writing. The inspiration is the original work, certainly, and thoughtful literary translators approach that work with great deference and respect, but the execution of the book in another language is the task of the translator, and that work should be judged and evaluated on its

own terms. Still, most reviewers do not acknowledge the fact of translation except in the most perfunctory way, and a significant majority seem incapable of shedding light on the value of the translation or on how it reflects or illuminates the original.

Even if it is unrealistic to wish that every reviewer of a translated work were at least bilingual, it is not unreasonable to require a substantive and intelligent acknowledgment of the reality of the translation. I am certainly not lamenting the fact that most reviewers do not make one-for-one lexical comparisons in order to point out whatever mistakes the translator may have made—a useless enterprise that enlightens no one since the book has already been published and errors cannot be rectified until the next printing—but I do regret very sincerely that so few of them have devised an intelligent way to review both the original and its translation within the space limitations imposed by the publication. It seems to me that their inability to do so is a product of intransigent dilettantism and tenacious amateurism, the menacing two-headed monster that runs rampant through the inhospitable landscape peopled by those who write reviews.

And so we come back to the first question: why does translation matter, and to whom? I believe it matters for the same reasons and in the same way that literature matters—because it is crucial to our sense of ourselves as humans. The artistic impulse

and the need for art in our species will not be denied. It has been with us almost from the beginning of our history, and despite profound changes in culture, customs, and expectations, it remains with us all over the world in a variety of guises. Where literature exists, translation exists. Joined at the hip, they are absolutely inseparable and, in the long run, what happens to one happens to the other. Despite all the difficulties the two have faced, sometimes separately, usually together, they need and nurture each other, and their long-term relationship, often problematic but always illuminating, will surely continue for as long as they both shall live.

1
authors,
translators,
and readers
today

Translation seen as conversation—
for conversation assumes equality
among the speakers—is clearly the
language of languages, the
language that all languages should
speak.

—NGUGI WA THIONG-O,
director, International Center for
Writing and Translation,
University of California at Irvine

The vast, constantly expanding sea of contemporary literature can easily swamp any reader interested in keeping abreast of new works and new writers. In my own case, and I believe this is true for many other people as well, I can find no way to read all the good books published in even one year in a single language. Despite our best intentions and finest desires, too many of those books pass us by as the pile of still-to-be-read volumes grows higher and higher, while our eyes seem to move more and more slowly, and our already jammed schedules become tighter and increasingly difficult to manage. This dire lack of time is extreme and appears to grow worse minute by minute, day by day. The inevitable next question is, I think, sadly obvious: why add to the welter of indispensable, high-priority titles we will never read by translating even more indispensable, high-priority titles from other languages? Our bookshelves already sag under the crushing weight of important volumes of contemporary writing. Fiction, poetry, history, biography, philosophy, memoir—how can we find the time to read even a small part of the significant works pub-

lished in English each year in the United States and the United Kingdom?

It is true, of course, that despite some very amusing theorizing on the subject by the late Guatemalan satirist and fiction writer Augusto Monterroso in his far-too-brief “How I Got Rid of Five Hundred Books” (117–121), quantity is not, or certainly should not be, key to this discussion: people do not read books by the pound, or keep a competitive record of how many volumes they own, or have their intelligence and education judged, by themselves or by others, on the basis of the number of feet of book-filled shelving that lines their walls. But the reality is staggering: keeping up with what is originally published in English each year would mean, at the very least, that we would have to give up gainful employment, never see another movie or play, never attend another concert, and certainly never take another walk or have another leisurely meal with friends. And yet it is also true that the fundamentally judicious and logical question, along with its implicit answer, of why we should even bother to translate books that may very well go unopened by readers who are increasingly pressed for time (not to mention a depressingly large public that has no interest at all in reading for what some publications irritatingly term a “literary experience”) needs to be countered with another, even more fundamental question: what do we forfeit, historically, potentially, and in actuality, as individuals and as a society, if we

somehow lose access to translated literature by voluntarily reducing its presence in our community or passively watching and quietly standing by as its availability to us is drastically and arbitrarily curtailed?

To begin to formulate a response, and to put the issue as succinctly and undramatically as possible, the question probably should be rephrased: What is the point of translating books? Why does the translation of literature matter at all, and whom does it benefit? What is the purpose of promoting the art of literary translation with funded projects, symposia, international conferences, lecture series, professional organizations and journals, prizes, and the occasional residency? Where is the cultural profit, the public good? Perhaps a case could be made for supporting the translation of classic works of world literature (very few, even among the most cynical and audacious, would have the temerity to dispute the value of reading Homer or Dante or Cervantes or Shakespeare, regardless of one's native language, if one does not know Ancient Greek or Medieval Italian or Renaissance Spanish or English), but we have already posited an overabundance of new books to read in a single language. Aren't there more than enough contemporary works of fiction, poetry, and drama in English to satisfy anyone's literary predilections without our having to venture into the fearsome, reputedly money-losing, famously reader- and publisher-resistant terrain of translation?

For translators, of course, there can never be enough translations. But in a masterwork of startling intellectual flim-flammery, there are some academics whose names, as Cervantes so beautifully put it, I do not care to remember, who actually believe that translations should be banned entirely from the curriculum of any self-respecting university. Either their beleaguered students of literature read the work in the original language, these pedagogues proclaim, or they don't read it at all, at least not in a class at the university. It is a stunning proposition, isn't it? Think of what it really means. If, for example, you do not read Akhmatova in Russian, Brecht in German, Montale in Italian, García Lorca in Spanish, Valéry in French, Kazantzakis in Greek, Ibsen in Norwegian, Strindberg in Swedish, Saramago in Portuguese, or Singer in Yiddish, you should not be permitted to study those authors in a formal, credit-bearing course on twentieth-century literature, especially if you are enrolled in graduate school. I spent a good part of my adult life teaching, usually in foreign-language departments, and although I wanted everyone in the world to study a few languages other than their own, the idea of eliminating translations entirely from the university course of study never once occurred to me. How could we get along without them? More to the point, how could I get along without them, when there are so many important languages in the world I cannot read and so many

valuable works of literature I would be entirely ignorant of if they had not been translated into English?

And yet the niggling, distasteful question persists: really, what is the point of translating works of literature when we already have a huge surfeit of books in our own language and a diminishing number of readers? Suppose we narrow the inquiry and consider only the translation of fiction. Are matters simplified and made more intelligible if we set aside plays, poetry, short fiction, essays, and all other species of belles-lettres and attempt to justify and support the translation of contemporary novels on the presumption that this restriction might produce a more manageable number of translated books for indefatigable readers of English? No, not at all. Even in this limited sphere, no one can read every novel originally published in English in a year's time, let alone all the translated ones. Even though the number of novels brought over into English each year is pitifully, frighteningly small when compared with the number of translated novels produced in publication centers around the world, translations of fiction seem to add unconscionably to the burden of unopened volumes that weighs on every serious reader. Still, it must be said that this is not the real issue. The raw number of books that we as individuals can read in a period of twelve months, or even a lifetime, is a profoundly inconsequential, even trivial approach to the somber question that has

been raised. Other considerations, with broader implications, seem much more relevant.

First, there is the disquieting matter of the growth and spread of an increasingly intense jingoistic parochialism in our country—the kind of attitude that leads certain people who should know better to believe that their nation and their language are situated, by a kind of divine right, at the center of the universe. The resulting self-image or self-conceptualization by definition transforms everyone else in the world into benighted barbarians whose cultures are unimportant and whose languages are insignificant. Certainly this is not, as we all realize, an exclusively modern phenomenon or one that is restricted to a particular language or nation, but we will focus on the situation most of us probably know best. In the United States, some speakers of English believe their native tongue is sanctified and therefore spiritually superior to any other. I am sure many of you have heard about and some may even have seen the bumper sticker, widely popular in those parts of our country where people have mounted impassioned crusades against bilingualism in any form, but especially Spanish/English bilingualism, which claims: “If English Was Good Enough For Jesus, It’s Good Enough For Me.” After the first incredulous giggle, this public display of ignorance verging on the lunatic brings more than one despairing tear to my eye. Surely Luis Rafael Sánchez, the Puerto Rican novelist and playwright, had something like this

chauvinistic derangement in mind when, in his inimitably ironic way, he coined the term Essential Nation of the Universe as an alternative name for the United States of America in his latest book, *Indiscreciones de un perro gringo* (Indiscretions of a gringo dog), the fictional memoir of Buddy Clinton, regrettably killed in 2002 by a car in Chappaqua, New York.

The high degree of xenophobia rampant in our country may help explain the American reluctance to embrace translation, but in my experience, British publishers display the same lethal disinclination, exemplified not only in a professional, deep-seated distrust of translation—they publish as woefully few literary translations in Great Britain as we do in the United States, a figure that hovers around three percent of all the books published in a year—but also in their widespread and high-handed tendency to harbor an unshakeable, insular contempt for American English. I have discovered, to my horror, that far too many British publishers insist on Anglicizing texts that have been translated by those of us who, to their minds, are little more than semiliterate American ex-colonials who flatter ourselves into thinking that the yawp we speak and write is actually English. In my impassioned objections to unreasonable editorial changes by publishers in Great Britain, I have said that in the past, when I as an American read books by D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, or Virginia Woolf, I did not expect their language to sound exactly like Ernest Hemingway's, William Faulkner's,

or John Steinbeck's; that I was not irretrievably confounded by differences in spelling or hopelessly discouraged or confused by unfamiliar words or turns of phrase or lexical references that were usually clarified by context; that anything not clarified by context was certainly easy enough to look up. My arguments did not move these publishers at all, not even when I appealed to nationalist sentiment and asked if they really believed that English readers were significantly more ignorant and unsophisticated than their American counterparts. How sorry I am now that I only recently learned of this remark, made by William Carlos Williams, in the 1957 folio *Poems in Folio*:

I don't speak English, but the American idiom. I don't know how to write anything else, and I refuse to learn.

How happy I would have been to use the citation in an unapologetic verbal counterattack. I did, however, finally manage to persuade the more reasonable among the English publishers that they could feel free to alter spelling in my manuscripts to conform to British usage but that I absolutely had to have final approval of lexical changes. This arrangement is now part of my contract for any book I translate that is published, usually at roughly the same time, in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

Sadly, this peculiar conflict between national—or is it con-

tinental?—variants of the same language is not confined to English. It is sobering and instructive to realize that Latin American writers too have often faced a comparable high-handed disdain for their American language on the part of Spanish publishers. A notorious instance of this kind of editorial imperialism involves Gabriel García Márquez. In *Living to Tell the Tale*, he recounts the following anecdote about the 1962 publication in Spain of *La mala hora* (*In Evil Hour*; originally titled *Este pueblo de mierda*):

Not content with touching up the grammar in the dialogues, the proofreader permitted himself to change the style with a heavy hand, and the book was filled with Madrilenian patches that had nothing to do with the original. As a consequence, I had no recourse but to withdraw my permission from the edition because I considered it adulterated, and to retrieve and burn the copies that had not yet been sold. The reply of those responsible was absolute silence. (232–233)

Oh, how familiar that lofty silence seems!

After he translated the book back into what he calls his Caribbean dialect, García Márquez sent the corrected manuscript to a Mexican publisher and brought out that revision as the first edition in 1966.

It is unfortunate that many American editors are not far behind their English and peninsular colleagues in bare-faced chauvinism and unforgivable, willful know-nothingness. I do

not believe publishing houses here reciprocate or return the linguistic insult by going out of their way to Americanize the texts of books first published in the United Kingdom or those written by British authors, though it has been pointed out to me that many books are turned down in the United States because they are “too British.” However, you may have read the January–February 2004 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* in which Benjamin Schwarz, the book review editor, made this remarkable observation in a statement called “Why we review the books we do”:

We tend to focus on prose-style in our assessment of fiction. It’s obviously far more difficult to do so when reviewing literature in translation, because both the reviewer and the reader of the book encounter not the author’s writing but the translator’s rendering of it. Hence we run fewer pieces on translated works.

Quite a few indignant responses, including mine, were sent to the magazine, but as far as I know, none were published. I’m afraid, however, that it did not occur to anyone to ask Schwarz if he really believed that the best way to deal with our remarkable paucity of vocabulary for reviewing or even talking about translated works was simply not to talk about them at all. One of the brightest students in a seminar I taught recently asked whether, in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, we were reading Rabassa or García Márquez. My first, unthinking response was “Rabassa, of course,” and then a beat later, I added, “and

García Márquez.” The ensuing discussion of how difficult it is to separate the two, and what it meant to us as readers, writers, and critics to make the attempt, was one of the liveliest and most engrossing we had that semester. Among other things, it spoke directly to the core of how translated books should be reviewed.

It has been suggested to me by an academic friend who is not a translator but is an indefatigable critic, editor, and reader, that translation may well be an entirely separate genre, independent of poetry, fiction, or drama, and that the next great push in literary studies should probably be to conceptualize and formulate the missing critical vocabulary. That is to say, it is certainly possible that translations may tend to be overlooked or even disparaged by reviewers, critics, and editors because they simply do not know what to make of them, in theory or in actuality. In the event you think I am exaggerating the lack of rational, thoughtful discussion of translations for reasons of parochial interest or because I have eaten more than my share of sour grapes, I will cite in its entirety a paragraph from a May 2007 review in a British publication of my translation of Mayra Montero’s *Dancing to “Almendra”*:

Montero’s story was originally written in Spanish but has been translated by Edith Grossman for English readers. Fortunately the translation doesn’t seem to have taken anything away from the beautiful style in which the book is written.

There is no indication, of course, that the reviewer can read Spanish or that his or her judgment is based on a reasoned comparison of the two versions of the novel. There almost never is in the dismissive reviews I have seen of translated works—mine, and those of other translators as well. A rare exception to this kind of uninformed reviewer is James Wood, who consistently pays serious attention to the real value of translation, bringing into focus the question of how books under review are translated and what priorities seem to guide translators in their choices. An example of his approach to writing about translations is in the November 26, 2007, issue of the *New Yorker*, where Wood has a beautiful piece on the celebrated translation of *War and Peace* by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, published by Knopf. I'll cite a few sentences from this review to give you an idea of Wood's perspicacity in discussing the work, and the thoughtful attention to relevant detail that creates so telling a difference between him and too many other reviewers:

Literary translators tend to divide into what one could call originalists and activists. The former honor the original text's quiddities, and strive to reproduce them as accurately as possible in the translated language; the latter are less concerned with literal accuracy than with the transposed musical appeal of the new work. Any decent translator must be a bit of both. . . . Translation is not a transfer of meaning from one language to another, Pevear writes, but a dialogue between two languages.

I am an indifferent historian and a worse theoretician, particularly when it comes to formal or theoretical literary and translation studies, but from time to time, when I contemplate the suspicion and resistance of the publishing establishment and its reviewing satellites toward translation, I wonder whether along with the lack of critical vocabulary, the difficulty may stem, at least in part, from a not-always-useful holdover of an earlier time. An unprecedented glorification of individualism and individual creativity held sway during the Romantic period, an emphatic celebration of a narrowly interpreted uniqueness and originality that is still extremely prominent in our thinking today. It is perfectly clear that by definition translators translate works written by someone else. Obviously we are not the first creators of the text, but I have the sense that at an earlier time in the history of the West—during the Renaissance, say—it never would have occurred to anyone to display contempt for the second writer or to feel any special ambivalence about the very concept of translation, particularly when the works in question had been brought over from classical and biblical languages.

Along these lines, Robert Wechsler cites Serge Gavronsky, the poet and translator from French:

Readers always want—it's a Romantic preoccupation, never existed before the nineteenth century—authenticity. They somehow believe that if someone signs a text, that text was secreted by that

body. Cocteau has a lovely image: he says, “I shit my books.” In a wonderful way, that’s what readers want. They want to smell the feces of authenticity. So when a translator comes on, he appears to be an intercessor . . . because he didn’t write it. (83)

During the Renaissance, however, there was a proliferation of works transposed into modern European tongues from Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and as I mentioned earlier, the inescapable cultural fact of translation may well be the best overarching general description we have of that historical period. Here is what the translators of the King James version of the Bible, first published in 1611, had to say about their work. I would venture to add that their opinion of translation was the one commonly held at the time:

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water.
(quoted in Wechsler, 11)

And even though Cervantes compared reading a translation to looking at a tapestry from the back, not once did he deny the inherent value of the enterprise. With typical irony, in fact, he lets us know that the entire first part of *Don Quixote* has been translated from Arabic, but then with the kind of double-edged mordancy that makes his sensibility so modern, Cervantes immediately throws doubt not only on the veracity and reliability

of the translator but stresses as well the probable mendacity of the original author.

Can it be that our current rejection of translation grows out of an overweening and misguided admiration for Romantic concepts of innovation and creativity? Or does the real, essential explanation lie elsewhere? Factors I have mentioned briefly (the self-congratulatory ignorance of the bumper sticker, or the close-minded editorial policy of major British publishers, or the ineptitude of most reviewers of translated books, or the startling provincialism of an important American periodical) all speak to a deeply imprinted cultural dogmatism and linguistic isolationism that may constitute the primary obstacle to literary translation in the English-speaking world. I would like to further explore the social ramifications and political repercussions of this grim possibility.

In his introduction to *Words Without Borders*, Andre Dubus III comments on the glaring reality of our American parochialism:

We are, of course, a country of immigrants. We come from the very cultures we no longer seem to know. A recent National Geographic study tested 18–24-year-old Americans, 83 percent of whom could not find Afghanistan on a map. 70 percent could not find Israel or Iran. Only 37 percent could locate Iraq. When asked the religion of India's majority population, nearly half answered Muslim when it is Hindu. A full 80 percent of Americans do not have passports, and there is this alarming statistic: . . . “50 percent

of all the books in translation now published world wide are translated from English, but only 6 percent are translated into English.” Our own [former] president has publicly referred to Slovakia as “Slovenia,” has called Kosovars “Kosovarians,” Greeks “Grecians,” and East Timorese “East Timorians.” . . .

There are theories as to how we’ve become so ignorant of other cultures around the world: geography and foreign languages are no longer taught in schools; U.S. media companies have cut back on world news coverage; we are isolated between two oceans and have friendly neighbors to the north and south and can afford the luxury of being provincial. . . . The consequences are dire: we have never been less isolationist in the variety of goods and services we consume from around the world, and never have we been more ignorant of the people who produce them. This is, if nothing else, fertile territory for misunderstanding, unresolved conflict, and yes, war. (xi–xii)

The free, essential exchange of literary ideas, insights, and intuitions—a basic reciprocity of thought facilitated and enhanced by the translation of works from other cultures—is a decisively significant, even defining phenomenon. I think it reasonable to suggest that we can use the wide availability of and free access to translations in any society as a clear, determinative sign of vigorous, uncensored freedom of communication, an issue that deserves to be at the forefront of our political thinking. It is a compelling and original benchmark to consider in our continual, crucially important efforts to protect liberty.

I have already alluded to the essential importance of literary

translation in the kind of civilized world we would like to inhabit, and touched briefly on the profound significance of a free-wheeling, ongoing exchange among languages and the literatures and cultures they express and contain, what Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, author of the epigraph to this chapter, calls their conversation and Richard Pevear their dialogue. By way of contrast, it is crucial for us to think carefully and clearly about the importance and weight that dictatorships all over the world attribute to language: to how it is used, and to what end, and by whom. Oppressive regimes have an incontestable penchant for dominating, corrupting, and stultifying language. Despotical governments are willing to go to extraordinary lengths in their usually successful, tragic official efforts to control, restrict, and narrow access to the spoken and written word. Imprisoned writers, banned books, censored media, restrictions on translations, even repeated attempts to abolish what are called "minority" languages (consider, as one example among many, the bitter struggle to eradicate Catalán during the long years of the Franco regime in Spain), are all clear indications that tyrannies take language, books, and access to information and ideas very seriously—much more seriously than democracies do. George Orwell's ghastly vision in *1984* of the creation of Newspeak and its intended consequence—the conscious perversion of thought processes in those who are exposed to impoverished language and diminished communication—is not, as we have come to

realize, pure dystopian fiction but a reflection of tendencies toward oppression that already exist in our history-battered world, the proclivities toward subjugation that we ignore at our own peril and must resist wherever and whenever they appear.

It seems to me that the defense and furtherance of literary translation, in particular the translation into English of young authors writing in what are so dismissively termed “exotic languages,” is—or should be—an intrinsic element in our commitment to free speech and civil liberty in this and other countries. I do not think that recognizing the interconnections among literature and translation, freedom and repression, the esthetic and the political, necessarily places an unconscionable ideological burden on the creation of works of art, or implies an imposition of unacceptable controls. I am speaking not of a writer’s loyalties, intentions, or specific ideas but of our own society’s willingness to embrace—at least give a hearing to—other attitudes and perspectives, other ways of looking at the world. This kind of reasoned approach to a broad range of diversified opinion represents a mode of thought that increasingly seems to be a wistful fantasy or a dream of the gleaming city on the hill, but I believe it can be defended, facilitated, and enhanced through the value we place on translation. As Ammiel Alcalay has said in his introduction to Miljenko Jergović’s short story collection *Sarajevo Marlboro*:

The circuitous routes traveled by literary texts across various borders, checkpoints, blockades and holding pens should finally, once and for all, lay to rest the romantic notion that such texts announce themselves and arrive simply by virtue of their inherent qualities as literature. Nothing could be farther from the truth: like any commodity, literary texts gain access through channels and furrows that are prepared by other means. Fashion, chance encounters, fortuitous circumstances, surrogate functions, political alliances and cataclysmic events such as war or genocide are much more certain and constant catalysts than judgment based on actual literary history or cultural importance. The texts that manage to sneak through the policing of our monolingual borders still only provide a mere taste—fragmented, out of context—of what such works might represent in their own cultures. (vii)

In another lament for our tendency toward insularity and consequent self-imposed isolation, Lorraine Adams, in a piece in the January 6, 2008, *Book Review* of the *New York Times*, mentions what she calls the “burka effect”—the paucity of contemporary literature by Muslims that has been translated into English and which is therefore unavailable to many of us in the United States. As Adams says:

Literature in translation, regardless of its origin, has trouble finding American publishers. The languages of Islam, unlike European languages, particularly French and Spanish, are not often spoken or read by American editors. “When you have a book proposal, you have to have at least two chapters and a synopsis in English,” explained Nahid Mozaffari, an Iranian historian who edited *Strange Times, My Dear*, a 2005 PEN anthology of contem-

porary Iranian literature. “But there’s no money to pay for translation. A lot of what’s happening is [that] nostalgic exiles or academics . . . [are] doing the chapter and synopsis in their spare time. Not all of them are good writers, and a lot [of literature] has been killed by bad translation.”

The inferences that can be drawn from this kind of circumstance are extremely grave. The phenomenon means that we have been denied—or are choosing to deny ourselves—access to the writing of a large and significant portion of the world, including movements and societies that loom on our national horizon with potentially dreadful political implications made even more menacing by our general lack of familiarity with them. Wishful thinking has very little effect on reality. The fact that we stubbornly and willfully insist on remaining ignorant of a certain culture and its literature does not make that civilization cease to exist.

Yet English once held its arms wide to embrace other nations and languages, and in terms of lexicon, we still have extremely porous boundaries, taking in and welcoming vocabulary from all over the world. I have heard this phenomenon explained as the result of England’s never having had an academy of the language to restrict and censor the presence of foreign elements and maintain at any cost the alleged “purity” of the mother tongue. The subject is an interesting chapter in the history of Europe, but whatever the etiology of the linguistic openness of

English, the clear consequence is the sheer vibrancy and flexibility of the language and its huge, constantly expanding, wonderfully contaminated, utterly impure lexicon. One example of this acceptance, ingestion, and domestication of the alien and strange was described in a November 8, 2007, interview in the *New York Times* with Daniel Cassidy, the author of *How the Irish Invented Slang*. The quantity of slang that has made its way into American English by way of the Gaelic-speaking Irish immigrants in New York is extraordinary. A pared-down list of lexical items etymologically rooted in Gaelic—“a back-room language, whispered in kitchens and spoken in the saloons,” according to Cassidy—includes the words *doozy*, *hokum*, *jerk*, *punk*, *grifter*, *helter-skelter*, *slob*, *slum*, and *knack*. Even certain phrases such as “gee whiz,” “holy cow,” and “holy mackerel” are, Cassidy claims, Anglicized versions of Irish; I was especially taken by “Say uncle!” whose origin Cassidy traces to the Gaelic *anacal*, which translates into English as “mercy.”

In the introduction I discussed a good number of reasons for fostering and promoting the translation of other literatures into English. I hope the benefit to us as readers is apparent by now. The importance to translators is self-evident. For contemporary writers, the positive effects and advantages are huge. To begin with, there is the ingrained desire of authors to reach as many readers as possible, and clearly the writer’s audience expands

as the book is translated and more and more people are able to read it. The English-language market not only is immense but, as I indicated earlier, it is also generally located in areas where the population tends to be literate and prosperous enough to purchase books. I have already alluded to the notion regarding the importance of a body of work being translated into English before a writer can even be considered for the Nobel Prize, since it is claimed, perhaps with reason, that English is the only language all the judges read. At the same time, however, the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl, in a widely reported statement to the press in October 2008, said that “Europe is still the center of the literary world. . . . The U.S. is too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature.”

Another salient reality that affects writers profoundly is the need for books to be translated into English in order for them to be brought over into other, non-European idioms, for English often serves as the linguistic bridge for translation into a number of languages. The translation of texts originally written in other Western languages into the enormous potential market represented by Chinese, for instance, often requires an English version first. Because, at least until recently, many more Chinese translators work from English than from Spanish, a con-

siderable number of Chinese-language versions of Latin American literary works have actually been based on the English translations. Some years ago, French was the conduit language, and many Spanish-language versions of Russian books were actually rooted in French translations of the texts. Of equal significance is the possible transfer of the book into other media like film and television. Powerful filmmakers and television producers whose work is distributed worldwide are all apt to read English.

In brief, then, there seems to be overwhelming evidence to the effect that if you wish to earn a living as a writer, your works must be translated into English regardless of your native language. All these considerations mean that the impact on writers around the world of the current reluctance of English-language publishers to bring out translations can be dire, especially for younger authors. And no matter how patently naïve it may sound, I believe that, regardless of which bloated international conglomerate owns them, publishing houses in the United States and the United Kingdom have an ethical and cultural responsibility to foster literature in translation. I do not expect this to happen to a significant extent any time soon, but it is a goal worth supporting, and every once in a great while, to use the language of an earlier time, another editor's consciousness may in fact be raised, allowing him or her to join the small band

of brave, committed souls in the industry who promote translated literature.

It well may be that in the best of all possible worlds—the one that antedates our Babelian hubris—all humans were able to communicate with all other humans, and the function of translators quite literally was unthinkable. But here we are in a world whose shrinking store of languages still comes to several thousand, a world where both isolationism and rampaging nationalism are on the rise and countries have begun to erect actual as well as metaphorical walls around themselves. I do not believe I am overstating the case if I say that translation can be, for readers as well as writers, one of the ways past a menacing babble of incomprehensible tongues and closed frontiers into the possibility of mutual comprehension. It is not a possibility we can safely turn our backs on.