

Translation and "True Language"

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Globalism is much in vogue these days, and cultural exchange is flourish-
ing more than ever. And where does this leave literature? While culture
in such genres as painting and music may course through the world with
relative ease, the language arts or literature cannot venture much beyond their
native milieu without undergoing the laborious process of translation. No
matter how sensitive to the tenor of the times and insightful in its analysis, a
writer who would have a work read overseas must accept the unavoidable
time lag between the production of the original and the completion of its
translation, which can require months, even years. Anything that might be-
come outdated as a passing fashion or trend is therefore rarely a candidate for
distribution in translation. For better or worse, authors wishing to reach read-
ers in other languages must measure time in relatively larger spans. They must
also accept the necessity of relying on the capacity of another—the translator—
to present their work to a readership in another language. This is an even more
essential problem than the time lag.

Movements to confirm translation as a literary endeavor and appreciate its
artistic integrity, rather than consigning such works to the status of necessary
evil, arose more than once in the twentieth century. Walter Benjamin's classic
essay, "The Task of the Translator" (original, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,"
1923), still offers much food for thought on this subject. While there is not
space here to introduce his argument in detail, we may note his citation of
French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98) regarding "the imperfec-
tion of languages." Mallarmé says, "The imperfection of languages consists in
their plurality, the supreme one is lacking." (*Theories of Translation*, ed. Rainer
Schulte and John Biguenet, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 78). The cre-
ation of poetry, said Benjamin, made possible verse that could philosophically
compensate on a higher level for the deficiencies of imperfect language. Like-

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wise he speculated that the language of a translation could open up the possibility that the translator's mother tongue might approach the supreme or "true language." He addresses the question of the translatability of a work into another language. When a certain work is rendered into another language, can the work intrinsically tolerate translation? The translator should grope for a suprahistorical kinship between the original language in which the work was written and the translator's language into which it is translated. Only after the translator identifies the latent possibilities of supreme language in the work he or she will translate, directing his or her mind to a higher level of language, does he or she render it into the recipient language. Thus an attempt is made at expression on a high level of language through the translation. The original language and the language of a translation are two fragments that can be seen as part of a vessel. Supplementing each other, the two pieces hold together to form a larger fragment. The more languages into which the original work is translated the closer in shape to a complete vessel its content will become. The supreme language, what Benjamin calls true language, remains elusive. However, the original text and the many texts the work is translated into together form an increasingly fully formed vessel, and this presages the formation of the "true language," which may, in fact, be eternally impossible to achieve.

The translator, therefore, has an active role to play in exploring the potential for bringing his or her own language closer to "true language" through translation of individual works. Unlike international exchange through the direct method of learning foreign languages, translation takes an "inside road," bringing the language we use every day and in which we think and contemplate out onto the world stage.

Humankind never fulfilled the ancient dream that all peoples would come to speak a common language such as Esperanto, and neither is such a dream likely to come true in the future. It may seem paradoxical that in this era of computer information and data processing, an ancient craft like translation has become ever-more essential and indispensable, but for the utilization of our native tongues in the age of globalization, its significance is far greater than the paradox.