

Introduction: A Rose is a Rose is a Fleur



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The most common complaint about translation—not translations specifically, but rather a confusion about them as a whole—is that they are always denigrations of the original, hack jobs performed just so some lazy lout confined to a single language can say he read such-and-such a book, and some other not-so-lazy lout can make a pile of cash. Every scintilla of the artist's original impulse is destroyed the moment the translator begins his or her rude linguistic intervention. Useless as texts in themselves, valuable only as vague approximations of plots or outlines of the originals, translations are the unwanted step-child of literature. You durst not claim to have read Dostoevsky when in fact you have but read Constance Garnett.

There is only one argument against those who believe translation is the work of the devil, or worse, a waste of time: *You are absolutely right*. No text will ever find its duplicate in another language. It would be like rendering a Giacometti figure in styrofoam and claiming it's as good as the first. To experience *Don Quixote* or the poems of Lorca truly, there is no recourse but to buckle down and learn Spanish.

Of course, translation is all about taking liberties. Any translator of poetry can attest that it is simply a matter of choosing which levels to concern yourself with at the expense of all the others. The deeply rooted word play of Paul Celan is impossible to replicate in English, yet I know of three volumes of Celan translations that approach the brilliance of the originals, even if they can never quite match them. Every language—indeed, every dialect

within a language—is weighted with secret meanings not intended to be understood by the outsider. Language is, at once, both what separates and ties us humans together.

But all the aforementioned arguments only go as far as purity is concerned, and purity is only ever concerned with itself. For those who thirst for the literatures of other nations—the stories contained therein, as well as the techniques with which they are told—and who are less than proficient in any language but their own, there is always translation. All told, it's not a bad thing to be left with. You can still claim to have read Dostoevsky, and no one but your friendly neighborhood purist will be the wiser.

There are many who consider translation to be a separate art form, as valid as poetry or dance. The argument goes that it contains all the freedoms and limitations of any other art form, no more nor less, and as far as primacy is concerned, a translation can be considered as a separate text entirely, a “new” work, not wholly independent of its source, but bearing as much impact upon a language as if it were something wholly original. After all, would poetry in English be the same had Baudelaire, Celan, or the Bible never been translated? Their impact, many readers will argue, was just the same.

Who would disparage anyone from languishing in Gregory Rabassa's translations of García Márquez, basking in the glow of Sophie Burnham's work on Musil, or welling up upon reading Stephen Mitchell's translations of Rilke? It is an arguable point, but *The Archaic Torso of Apollo* is certainly no less a

work of art in Mitchell's English than it is in Rilke's German. If, as the poem says, the goal of an art work is to move the soul inexplicably, then the poem by Rilke/Mitchell I first read when I was nineteen is as primary a work as any. I did indeed "change my life," something I had no desire to do when I read the poem in German. It took reading it in *my* primary language for the change to be affected.

Translation allows fresh air to enter into our language and literature, just as reading invites fresh air into our lives. In this focus, we present reviews of literature translated out of the Portuguese, Italian, Polish, and Hungarian languages into English, and Jen Hofer covers a small-press exhibit recently held in Mexico City, giving us a taste of how the book market translates across the border. If, as the ubiquitous "they" say, we are entered into a global age, then literary translation serves much like the studies economists make of the economies of other nations: as a guard against complacency, and to know which way the coming winds might blow.