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On translating and being translated

I know I will annoy many writers and readers if I say that being read and understood —communicating, as they say— is by no means the first aim of literature. The first aim of literature is the construction of the work. It is accomplishing the writer's obsession to create an artifact, in this case a literary one, that will function as well as possible. It is feeling the satisfaction of choosing and combining words, of tightening up syntax, of moulding a form: the fulfilment of constructing a work of art. Later, and only later, comes the reader. And this reader is, first of all, the writer.

The writer constructs for the pleasure of doing so and then, in part as a reader, to understand the world and understand him- or herself. The writer gives shape to deep experience and hence objectively possesses it. When all this is done, then, and only then, the reader who is other than the writer enters the scene, the invited reader, first of all in the author's own linguistic milieu. Next come growing numbers of invited readers and thus translation into other languages. Translating a text into other languages to increase the number of readers is important. But the role of translating in literature is much more important than increasing the number of readers. In fact, translation comes into play earlier. It is there from the very start. Writing, for a writer, is to translate his own individual language, full of idiosyncratic idioms, family twists, semantic

deviations, slang —spur of the moment or baggage of education— into a language that, while still conserving the warmth and vitality of this personal language, is to be understood by all those who belong to the same linguistic milieu. Writing, then, is translating. And once the work is written, the reader from the same linguistic milieu must also translate it from the common language into his personal language so as to understand the text in a way that is alive, warm, moving —the things that really count. Reading is also translating, translating within the same language.

Next, so that the form in which we have written can be read and understood in other linguistic settings, the work must undergo the process that, strictly speaking, we call translation. The *form* in which we have written the work needs to be *transformed* by somebody so that it will function within another system of signs, and hence it needs somebody to transfer it into another language. But it isn't enough for the translator merely to know the language from which the work is being translated; what must also be known, as well as possible, is the personal language and idiosyncratic features of the author whose work is being translated, not only to offer the general sense of the common language in which the author has established the text, but also its more intimate sense. Then, evidently, the translators must know the language into which the translation is being done and be capable of offering in this language what they have deeply understood. Here too, a double translation must be made, into the common language of the translator's linguistic milieu of course, but also into the translator's own literary sensibility, for only through personal linguistic idiosyncrasy can the translator provide a faithful rendition of the first translation that the author has produced in the act of writing. All in all, it seems complicated. And is. It is difficult to translate successfully. However, the risk must be taken, and one must dare to wish to be translated because, without translation, one's works would be no more than a closed exercise within one's own system, which, in the long term, can be debilitating. And while it is well known that a language is revitalised by importing the forms of other languages through translation, I also think that when a language has to go into another language, it very often discovers its own intrinsic deficiencies and this awareness is useful for forcing the language to find forms of genuine enrichment, fertile flexibilities, transmittable constructions and idioms that confer nuances.

Translating and being translated are indispensable for the healthy development of a language and indispensable, too, for being able to fine-tune one's own language so as to acquire an ever more sensitive instrument for the first aim of writing I mentioned at the outset: the construction of a form. Translating and being translated mean that the mental, instrumental, sentimental and cognitive fields of a language can expand, and that, in the long term, the language that has been able to translate and to be translated is now better equipped to slip into increasingly subtle forms, into forms that read the world and that understand it in ever-greater depth. Translating and being translated mean advancing closer and closer to true global understanding, an understanding that does not eschew idiosyncrasies, an understanding that does not reduce the world to one single and thus impoverished language and to one single reductive and primary way of thinking. Such a reduction might seem useful for exploitation but only because it is founded on illiteracy. The language of the world has to be translation. Anything else would be simplification, impoverishment, intellectual abjection. Anything else would be to squander the immense richness of the world's personal and linguistic idiosyncrasies, and revert to utter barbarism II