

## The Meaning of Translation

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In Canto XXXI of the *Inferno*, as Dante and his guide Virgil approach the edge of the Ninth and final circle of Hell — the circle where traitors meet their eternal punishment — Dante hears a blast louder than the loudest thunderclap and catches sight in the distance of something that sounds very much to the contemporary ear like the Manhattan skyline: “*me parve veder molte alte torri*” or, in Robert Hollander’s translation, “I saw what seemed a range of lofty towers.”

Virgil, who’s been here before, sympathizes with Dante’s mistranslation of the hazy shapes, explaining that his eyes have been deceived by distance: these are not towers but the giants that ring the pit within which the Ninth Circle lies. The horrific features of the first of the giants soon loom into better view, and as the two travellers through Hell draw closer, the giant shouts these strange words at them: “*Raphel mai amecche zabi almi.*” Virgil shouts back at him imperiously: “You muddled soul, stick to your horn! Vent yourself with that when rage or passion takes you.”

Virgil then explains:

“... He is his own accuser.  
This is Nimrod, because of whose vile plan  
The world no longer speaks a single tongue.  
Let us leave him and not waste our speech,

For every other language is to him as his  
To others, and his is understood by none.”

Medieval tradition associated Nimrod, the grandson of Noah, with the building of the Tower of Babel, and hence with the demise of monolingual unity and the sad, plurilingual confusion that thereafter became mankind’s inescapable destiny. The words Nimrod shouts -- *Raphel mai amecche zabi almi* -- have no meaning in any living language; they belong to the lost language of Babel, and Nimrod is the only one left who speaks it. This one line is identical in every translation of the *Commedia* into every language because it represents untranslatability itself, a language that can be understood by none.

Yet, as Virgil scornfully tells him, Nimrod’s meaning, when he blows off those thunderous blasts on his hunter’s horn, is also fully comprehended by everyone within earshot. Either way, there’s no translating Nimrod: his speech is so semantically obscure that no translation is possible, while the rage of his blaring trumpet is so universally intelligible that no translation whatsoever is needed. Nimrod’s vast, monolithic figure stands as a counterpart to the many entities, past and present, for whom all speech is mere gibberish, and the only real means of communication is via universally intelligible blasts of rage —explosions, guns, bombs.

It’s quite natural for Dante’s Virgil, the Latin poet, to deplore the linguistic plurality Nimrod inflicted upon mankind. Virgil, of course, wrote in the language that had, for Dante and many centuries of educated Europeans who came before and after him, the greatest claim to universality, the language that transcended temporal and spatial

differences and made all learned men, whatever their vernacular, mutually intelligible – the language that came closest to overcoming the punishment at Babel. However, the figure of Dante, at Virgil’s side, says nothing to or about Nimrod once he’s been made aware of the giant’s identity, but simply heeds Virgil’s advice to remain silent, and moves on.

How can we translate that silence? We know that Dante, the author of the *Commedia*, as distinct from the character who appears within it, was a highly accomplished linguistic theorist who in his incomplete Latin treatise *De Vulgari Eloquentia* evinced a fully developed, startlingly modern understanding of the fact that linguistic diversity arises out of the diversity of human contexts. Dante knew that human beings in different professions, different social classes, different places and different times will speak different languages, and that those languages are living entities, continually evolving. Furthermore, Dante was a translator, whose avowed ambition for the *Commedia* was to translate the power and scope of the epic poems of classical antiquity into his own vernacular. Small wonder that he fails to chime in when Virgil deplores Nimrod!

Later, Dante the author reveals that Nimrod is *not* entirely guilty of humanity’s polyglot condition. Mankind turns out to have been always already multilingual — as Dante’s theory of the inevitable emergence of different languages out of differing contexts in space and time would suggest. In Canto XXVI of the *Paradiso*, Dante meets Adam, the first soul, who makes it clear that he spoke a different language from Nimrod and his followers. “The tongue I spoke,” Adam says,

... was utterly extinct

before the followers of Nimrod turned their minds  
to their unattainable ambition.

Yet before we embrace Dante too readily as a standard-bearer of linguistic plurality in contrast to the monolithic monolingualism variously represented by Nimrod or Virgil, let's remember one of the primary aims his masterpiece was intended to achieve — and in very large measure did achieve. For before composing the *Commedia*, Dante wrote passionately in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* of the need for an “illustrious vernacular” that would replace the “cacophony of the many varieties of Italian speech” with a single, enlightening, exalting and unifying language.

We ourselves live in an era when plurality is the reigning dogma, taken in by every child along with the television shows he watches over his bowl of breakfast cereal in the morning -- no matter where on the planet he might be growing up. A while ago, a friend sent me a list of the “Top Ten Children’s Books Least Likely to Find a Publisher.” Number one on the list was: *You’re Different — and That’s Bad!* But somehow our much-declared passion for plurality and diversity hasn’t fully extended into the way we talk about translation, which is, after all, an inevitable aspect of linguistic plurality. All too often, contemporary discussions of translation bespeak a mindset that seems hardly to vary from Virgil’s — a mourning for a lost pre-lapsarian monolingualism, and frustration with the affliction of linguistic diversity and the debased impostures and forgeries of translation that result from it. What follows is a description of the view of translation in the United States, and more generally in the English-speaking world, which strikes me as particularly crucial for us right now. However, I realize that many of you

will have very different situations in your regions and languages to describe, and I very much look forward to hearing about those situations as this Global Seminar progresses.

It isn't that we in the United States haven't had anyone teach us how to view translation in any other way. But the lessons of generations of linguists, literary critics and theorists, phenomenologists, eminent novelists, poets and essayists and even translators seem to have simply failed to register. An excellent example of such a failure is supplied by the current Wikipedia entry for George Steiner's *After Babel*, which very aptly quotes Steiner's famous dictum: "To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate" — a statement that places translation at the very heart of perception itself, and thus at the center of all intellectual processes. But alas, this very same Wikipedia entry then goes on to paraphrase or translate the meaning of *After Babel* in the following terms: "Real translation between languages is impossible because the original meaning is always lost: the translated text is tainted by the translator's own cultural beliefs, knowledge and attitudes."<sup>1</sup>

To say of translation itself that "the original meaning is always *lost*" is to express a medieval yearning for an absolute language that can exist without regard to context – a language that would not be language at all, but mathematics. To go on to add that the translated text is tainted by the translator's own beliefs and knowledge is to accuse Dante of having *tainted* Virgil with a millennium of Christian thought and to accuse me of having *corrupted* Dante with my own image of the Manhattan skyline when I quoted him at the beginning of this talk. It is to

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<sup>1</sup> After Babel. (6 September, 2008). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved February 14, 2009 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/After\\_Babel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/After_Babel).

deny or seek to refute the history of literature, and the ability of a great work of literature, or any text, to *enrich* itself by generating new meanings as it enters new contexts.

OK — that may seem to be a lot of weight to place on a single Wikipedia entry. But there is other evidence. In a recent interview, a very talented young translator who is receiving a lot of attention in the United States right now said mournfully, “There’s no way a translation can ever be as good as the original.” So prevalent is the view of translation as *loss* that even translators have internalized it. Eliot Weinberger, the distinguished essayist and translator, has written about an occasion a few years ago when he and the Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, with whom Weinberger had a very close working relationship for most of Paz’s life, gave a bilingual reading. The *New York Times* review made no mention of Weinberger’s name but reported: “Octavio Paz was accompanied by his translator—always a problematic necessity.”

And do not imagine that this negative view of translation arises from some recent resurgence of nostalgia for medieval modes of thought. “Let’s not kid ourselves,” the translator and critic Wyatt Mason wrote a few years ago, “everyone hates translations. The evidence is everywhere in the history of literature:”

Cervantes wrote that reading a translation was “like looking at the Flanders tapestries from behind: although you can see the basic shapes, they are so filled with threads that you cannot fathom their original luster.” (...) Gide observed that the translator was “a horseman who tries to put his steed through paces for which it is not built.” Madame de Lafayette equated the translator with “a lackey whose mistress sends him to pay someone a compliment; whatever she

said politely, he renders rude.”<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, a recent study by Paul Davis of translation in English culture between 1646 and 1726 identifies a number of metaphors frequently used during the period — which might otherwise be seen as a golden age of translation since translation was an ordinary activity of the era’s greatest poets, and enjoyed a status alongside their original poetry. But the metaphors tell a different story: translators were slaves or drudges, they were fraudulent, infantile, servile, and impotent.<sup>3</sup>

I know I am not going to shock anyone too much when I announce that translation is not always done well. All of us are aware that all forms of human artistic endeavor are prone to failure, and just as there are probably more bad poems, novels and plays, bad songs and bad movies than good ones, there are quite likely more bad translations than good ones. But few argue, in response to the many instances of bad filmmaking we’ve all been subjected to, that filmmaking in and of itself is bad, regrettable and to be deplored and avoided, if not actively stamped out. Yet translation itself, the very practice of literary translation, is constantly viewed in just that way — it is always inferior, it is inevitably and in its very nature debased.

One purpose served by this longstanding view of translation as inherently inadequate, inept and faithless is clear. It gets the translator out of the way. We want to read Dante, not Robert Hollander. We want to hear the poetry of Octavio Paz, not Eliot

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<sup>2</sup> “Adventures in Literary Translation: Swann’s Ways.” *The New Republic*, January 17, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Davis, *Translation and the Poet’s Life: The Ethics of Translating in English Culture, 1646-1726*. (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Weinberger. To endow the translator with agency, intent, skill and creativity enough to allow for the possibility that a translation could be good is to rock the very foundations of the way we read, forcing us to take in both a text and a performance of that text, forcing us to see two figures where we only want to see one.

Oddly enough, we are perfectly able, willing and even quite eager to take in both text and performance in any number of other arenas — where the theatre is concerned, for example. And not just the theatre: each year the United States recording industry gives out its highest award -- the Grammy — to the person who has done the best job of reading a book aloud on tape. Quite often, that reader is not the author of the book, though it was the author himself who won last year when the Grammy in the Spoken Word category was won by Barack Obama, who beat out Bill Clinton for the award in a victory that now seems a harbinger of other victories to come. The person who reads a book aloud embodies it in a way that no one has any trouble applauding as a performance entirely separate from the writing of the book; clearly, the simple fact of having written his book did not necessarily mean that Barack Obama would be any good at reading it aloud -- though, as it turns out, he was. Where translated texts are concerned, an appreciation of an actor's reading of a book can efface all notion of any other performance that might be involved. Douglas Hofstadter tells of having read a newspaper article whose author excitedly extolled a new recording of *The Iliad* performed by the actor Derek Jacobi. A few days later, a letter to the editor from the novelist Joyce Carol Oates pointed out that Jacobi had not recorded *The Iliad* in the original Greek, and reminded readers that the text was translated into English by Robert Fagles, a fact at least

as worthy of note as the name of the actor who read the text aloud.<sup>4</sup>

The distinction here, between the performance of the actor who reads the text aloud and that of the translator is one of embodiment. We are aware of the actor's *body*, we can hear the timbre of his voice, sense his presence. A good translator also *embodies* a literary work — paces around the room acting it out, visualizing every image, reading it aloud, listening to its rhythms, feeling how the words flow from the tongue – this is how a good translation is produced. But this embodiment is reflected only in the selection and sequence of words on a page. And there is already one other disembodied presence on that page: the author's. It may be that humankind cannot bear too much disembodiment, that one Holy Ghost is all we can take. Yet, as the moment of authorship recedes in time, and especially after the author's death, we become increasingly willing to discuss the translator's performance, as we've seen recently in the English-speaking world with a string of retranslations of Proust, Tolstoy and Cervantes that have sparked impassioned debate about the their translators' prowess.

The aspect of the translator's initial disembodiment or invisibility that may be most disturbing to both the author of a work and its translator is the fact that in most cases, the translator's performance is not fully or remotely appreciable by the author of the work, the person most directly interested in it. The Australian writer Peter Carey told me about meeting the Japanese translator of his novel *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, which is written in the lingo of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Australian provincial thugs. When the

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<sup>4</sup> *Le ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language*. (Basic Books, 1997), pp. 354-355.

translator presented him with her Japanese rendering of the novel, he stared at the book, knowing he would never have any real grasp of what she'd done with it. In a case like that, there's little a writer can do but take a translator's performance on faith. Yet when a thing as crucial as one's own work becomes so unknowable, it's small wonder that suspicions of treachery and betrayal crop up. What would the historical Virgil have thought of what Dante made of him? What would he have thought of what the U.S. Government makes of him by printing, in the original Latin, a line from a poem of his that describes the blending of ingredients to form a pesto — “e pluribus unum” — on every one of its dollar bills? Does the author of an original text become a character — “the author” — in a work created by the translator?

Another reason for the negation of the translator's work that is particularly relevant to the English-speaking world arises from a certain shame over our inability to read works in the radiant clarity of their original languages. We turn away from translation in embarrassment over the linguistic deficiency that has left us prey to the ineptitudes and infidelities of translators. As we grow more monolingual and less able to comprehend what the ability to translate between languages would be, we become increasingly ashamed and mistrustful. Best to turn away from translation altogether. Publishers in the United States will tell you with great certainty that a book whose cover explicitly presents it as a translation will have fewer buyers. After all, the original meaning is tainted, corrupted and lost. In this view, translation is a *threat* to linguistic plurality. Instead of reducing other languages to our own by translating them, these eager enthusiasts seem to be saying, we should be *learning* them!

The spurious nature of this stance requires very little debunking. Though Michael Henry Heim, who is a participant in this seminar, speaks German, Russian, Polish, Czech, Hungarian and eleven other languages, and has recently taken on Chinese, very few among us are likely to master more than two or three languages. That leaves us inevitably dependent on translators for all the others. Even Professor Heim needs a translation in order to read Arabic, Japanese, Greek, etc. So what is the real source of this pseudo-intellectual shame over our inability to read the original? The dismissal of translation in the English-speaking world is strikingly self-serving. Our rejection of translation has served to compound and extend our monolingualism across the globe. Yes, English translates very little, but the scope of its monolingualism goes far beyond that. When we take a more careful look at other languages that pride themselves on translating far more than English does, it turns out that the great bulk of what they're translating is coming from English. Meanwhile, in universities across the globe, virtually all academic research in the physical sciences everywhere on earth is published in English, and the social sciences seem to be moving in the same direction, while the number of different languages taught continually dwindles. Indeed, in some places not normally considered the "English-speaking" world—the Scandinavian countries, for example—mastery of English as a second language is so common that publishers see less and less of a need for translation into the local language, since everyone can read English. The market for books published in English outside the officially English-speaking world amounts to several billion dollars a year at this point, and continues to grow.

Yiyun Li was born in Beijing and came to the United States in 1996 at the age of 24, speaking quite hesitant English, to pursue a doctorate in immunology. Three years

later she decided to abandon her scientific career and become a writer. In 2007, she was one of the seven writers on Granta's list of the 21 Best Young American Novelists whose native language was not English. When she came to speak at Columbia University several years ago, she explained that her decision to write in English was motivated by two things. First, she quickly realized when she arrived in the U.S. that there was very little translation of foreign literature there, and she wanted to convey Chinese realities to the people she was now living among. Second, she said: "I wanted to write in a language that my mother cannot read."

Li is not the first native speaker of Chinese to become a celebrated American writer. She is preceded by, among others, Ha Jin, who first came to the U.S. at the age of 28, and won the National Book Award in 1999 for his novel *Waiting*. English is fortunate and enriched by the fact that writers like Li and Jin have chosen it as their instrument. A writer's choice of a language to write in is deeply personal and increasingly unpredictable. The American writer Jonathan Littell chose to write his first novel, *Les bienveillants*, in French, and it won the Prix Goncourt two years ago. Anna Kuzumi Stahl is an American of German and Japanese extraction who moved to Argentina in her mid-20s, became fluent in Spanish, and has now published several successful works of fiction written in Spanish.

Nevertheless, there is one aspect of Yiyun Li and Ha Jin's trajectory that should give us pause: the danger that the presence of many such writers in English might make us feel free to dispense with any need to translate the writers who continue to work in Chinese. The example of Chinese is particularly telling because of the profound impact

the Chinese language has had on the literature of the English-speaking world in the past century. Let's remember that it was his fascination with the Chinese language, which he studied but never actually knew very well, that led Ezra Pound to create the 1915 collection of translations of classic Chinese poetry titled *Cathay*, one of the most influential and transformative books in the history of American poetry.

Meanwhile, in November, the New York *Times* reported that China's government-controlled media censored the Chinese translation of Barack Obama's inauguration speech to remove its negative comments about communism.<sup>5</sup> However, the Chinese media published the full text of the speech in English. This was quite paradoxical, for in the past several years the Chinese government spent hundreds of millions of dollars in a huge drive to teach English to as much of its population as possible in preparation for the Olympic games. Its censorship of the Chinese translation of Obama's speech was less a betrayal of Obama, therefore, than a betrayal of the Chinese language itself.

The case of the literature of the Indian subcontinent might be relevant here, as well. India has benefited greatly from the lingua franca it inherited from its British colonizers and has reciprocated by making enormous contributions to English literature. Yet we in the English-speaking world very rarely hear of or read the work of Indians who write in Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali or any of the region's other languages. There are several of you here who know far more about this than I do, and I defer to you, but I can't

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Wong and Jonathan Anfeld, "Chinese TV Censors Part of Address by Obama," January 21, 2009.

help hazarding a conjecture: We have Jumpha Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, so many others. Why translate? Is that what we're thinking?

The Welsh ethnolinguist David Crystal predicted some years ago that if current trends continue, within 500 years we could be living in a monolingual world. It once happened at a congress of International PEN, the writer's organization, that the president of the organization, Jiri Grusa, grew so frustrated with the assembly's general tendency to emit hot air that he banged his gavel ferociously and shouted, "Please: no statements about the future of humanity." I have always tried to follow that particular instruction, and so will make no further comment on Crystal's prediction— except to point out that the idea of a monolingual humanity corresponds perfectly to the prevailing image of the future that has been purveyed by American television and film for decades. From *Star Trek* and its many spin-offs to the current cartoon *Futurama*, future humans, including Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise, all speak only English. When non-humans are encountered, translation is performed instantaneously by computers that imperceptibly and flawlessly render the speech of alien beings from distant planets into standard American English. In the future world of American television, there are no translators.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Seminar participant Aliza Ben Moha for sharing a paper she has written on this subject titled "So How Do All Those Aliens Speak English." She points out that Voyagers 1 and 2, sent off by NASA to explore the outer reaches of the solar system in 1977, each carried a disk with recordings of greetings in 154 languages. Another Seminar participant, sci-fi expert Hannes Riffel, told me about a futuristic American TV show called *Firefly* which aired on Fox Broadcasting in 2002, in which the characters frequently speak Chinese. Though critically acclaimed, the show was cancelled after 11 episodes.

The ability to speak and be heard, to write and be read — this is one of the great goals of the human spirit, Virgil’s goal, Dante’s goal, our goal. We all of us —and translators and writers more than most— must at some level believe that a world where people are intelligible to one another is a better one than the Nimrod-world of gibberish on the one hand and violent rage on the other. To that extent, it’s hard to deplore the global rise of a lingua franca. Communication is never easy, but having a common language unquestionably makes it easier.

The problem lies with the nature of that lingua franca’s relationship to translation. The persistence within English of a medieval view of translation as loss and betrayal — as a regrettable practice that inevitably results in an inferior text, a pastiche, an imposture — really amounts to a tacit stance of “English only,” and one that is far more insidious and effective than the tactics employed by citizens’ groups in the United States who take those words as their rallying cry in their effort to block the use of Spanish and Chinese in government communications and public schools. The pre-Babel world Virgil viewed as so patently preferable to ours – a monolingual mankind – is no longer quite the impossibility it once was. We need, it turns out, to be more careful what we wish for and think harder about what we really want when we deplore translation: we might get it.

What is the meaning of translation? Let me ask the question another way. Which reading of Dante is the real reading? My reading of Robert Hollander’s verse translation or Samuel Huntington’s prose translation? The reading of the Italian original by Hollander or Huntington? The reading of a contemporary American poet currently working on a “translation” of the *Commedia* based only on the existing English

translations, without reference to the original Italian which she does not speak (which is modeled on an 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian's translation of Homer from existing Italian translations, with no knowledge of the Greek)? A Korean medievalist's reading of a heavily annotated edition of the Italian original? A secular Italian's delightful afternoon listening to a celebrated actor's recitation of the *Commedia* in a public square in Florence? The dogged effort of a devout Catholic who spends years studying the *Commedia* in a Romanian translation and takes every word of it to be the almost literal truth? The reading of Jorge Luis Borges, who painstakingly deciphered the *Commedia* in the original Italian while riding the bus to and from a dreary job in a suburban library, and later wrote an essay pointing out that the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* written by the Venerable Bede in England in the 8th century contains a tale that strikingly parallels the *Commedia* in many respects, though it is highly improbable Dante ever read it? The reading of one of Dante's contemporaries who needed no footnotes to understand any of the allusions, but regarded the *Commedia* as little more than a foolhardy linguistic experiment undertaken by a longwinded, hotblooded Florentine renegade? Dante's own reading, fully aware of the physical and semantic resonance that every word of the *Commedia* had for him, its author, but almost entirely unaware of the *Commedia*'s destiny, the seven centuries of political and literary history in which the *Commedia* has evolved and generated new meanings from his time to our own?

What does a translator do? The translator strives to do what Dante did: find a synthesis between incompatible things: two languages that say and mean differently, two cultural systems that are at odds with each other. In other words, a translation is neither a debased replacement for the original to be used only as a crutch by the linguistically

handicapped, nor an inevitably failed apprentice's copy of an artistic masterwork, nor a treacherous betrayal of the original author's clearly stated intentions. A translation is a reading of a literary work, and it is a literary work. "The poem dies when it has nowhere to go," wrote Eliot Weinberger, in a luminous line. Translation is where the poem goes if it doesn't die. Translation sheds light on and gives life to the work that it reads, performs it, comments on it and interprets it even as it transforms it in order to connect it into a new cultural space. Furthermore, a translation is an expression of the translator's intentions, will, creativity, erudition, skill, taste, and timing, and of the translator's views of the cultural translated from and of the culture translated into. To the extent that we abandon old and damaging metaphors about loss, betrayal and punishment, and instead treat translators as purposeful, skilled, erudite, and creative actors whose performances can greatly enrich the texts they perform, we will have better translators and better translations. To the extent that this change can occur within the English language, we will also have a lingua franca that serves as a space of real encounter, and in which the native speaker of English can read works from the entire world, not merely the English-speaking world, and so can native speakers of Chinese or Bengali, who can encounter each other's literatures through the English they have acquired as an economic imperative.

This is the view of translation for which Jorge Luis Borges — the son of two translators who often identified himself not as a writer or a scholar but as a translator — appeals in his crucial 1936 essay "Los traductores de las 1001 noches," of which this talk is only a kind of paraphrase. Borges compares a number of translations of *The Thousand and One Nights* into English (by Sir Richard Burton), French (by Antoine Galland and Joseph Charles Mardrus) and German (by Enno Littmann), and does so almost without

regard to the original Arabic, a language he could not read. He assesses the various translations in light of their translators' practices and intentions and of their reception by the audiences that read them. Each translator's recreation of the *Nights* is quite different — some are spare, some luxuriant, some are heavily censored, others wildly obscene. At the same time, each translation is shown to participate in all the others, and in the lengthy history of orality, writing and translation that brought the *Nights* into Arabic in the first place. Borges concludes that the translation he likes least is by the German Orientalist Enno Littmann who is always "lucid, readable, mediocre." Borges explains:

The versions by Burton and Mardrus, and even by Galland, can only be conceived of *in the wake of a literature*. Whatever their blemishes or merits, these characteristic works presuppose a rich (prior) process. In some way, the almost inexhaustible process of English is adumbrated in Burton — John Donne's hard obscenity, the gigantic vocabularies of Shakespeare and Cyril Tourneur, Swinburne's affinity for the archaic, the crass erudition of the authors of 17th-century chapbooks, the energy and imprecision, the love of tempests and magic. In Mardrus' laughing paragraphs, *Salammbô* and La Fontaine, the *Mannequin d'osier* and the *ballets russes* all coexist. In Littmann, who like Washington cannot tell a lie, there is nothing but the probity of Germany. This is so little, so very little. The commerce between Germany and the *Nights* should have produced something more. [...] Chance has played at symmetries, contrasts, digressions. What might a man — a Kafka — do if he organized and intensified this play, remade it in line with the Germanic distortion, the *unheimlichkeit* of Germany.

Finally, having told you the extent to which *this* vision of translation and what it can be, Borges's vision, has yet to fully register, at least not in the English-speaking world, I'm now very happy to contradict myself, tell you how much it *has* registered, and give you a sense of how a translation sphere, as we might call it, has recently come into fuller bloom in English and globally.

Over the past decade, a number of new projects have sprung up, or further developed, each of which, in its own way, addresses an aspect of the issues I have outlined here. New publishing houses such as Chad Post's Open Letter and the Archipelago Press have been founded specifically to publish translation into English, and websites such as *Words Without Borders* have done an extraordinary job of using the Internet to bring work into English to audiences around the world. New academic programs have been founded at several universities, including the University of Rochester, Princeton University, and the University of Illinois to educate new generations of translators about the meaning and the practice of translation. Innovative new programs of support for translation have been initiated by French, Dutch, and Catalan cultural organizations, among others. Book fairs in the United States and elsewhere have initiated outreach programs to various literatures of the world. Sociologists have begun studying international translation patterns, and organizations in the English-speaking world are working towards at last establishing accurate and regularly updated statistics about such pertinent facts as the number and percentage of translations published in English. Literary festivals have emerged to bring writers from around the world into conversation and connection with their American counterparts . In short, this is a moment of exhilarating energy and expansion for people engaged in translation. And I can't help very cheerfully noting, in this context, that the United States of America has just elected a President who, among other attributes, happens to be fluent in Indonesian, as a result of having lived in Indonesia for several years as a child.

At the center of this sphere are the translators themselves. And those translators are increasingly empowered. One of the most dejecting statements about the career of a

literary translator that I have heard was made by the great William Weaver, to whom the English-speaking world owes its experience of most of the major Italian writers of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even so, Weaver told friends that he had never once managed to initiate a translation project himself —publishers weren't interested in the books that he brought to them wanting to translate. The idea of the translator as the handmaiden, the instrument of someone else's will, pressed into service to carry out a task that has been established by others, was that strong.

That paradigm has shifted. I'm happy to report that translators in the U.S. are now adopting an increasingly proactive stance as entrepreneurs who bring their translations about by seeking out works that deserve translation, finding the funds to translate them, and finding publishers for them. And publishers are increasingly looking to translators to do that. In other words, the task of the translator is deemed to include the task of the critic — the translator selects what is best and most deserving of interest, convinces others of the validity of the choices, translates the text, and serves as its spokesperson in the new language. This role has long been acknowledged by the National Endowment for the Arts, a U.S. government agency to which translators can apply for grants to support translation projects which they initiate. And it is now further supported by the PEN Translation Fund, a project to support translation into English that I have guided since its inception six years ago.

The Fund was established by an individual who insists upon remaining anonymous, and who walked into the offices of PEN American Center one day – it was the first time any of us had met him — and announced that the issue of the paucity of

translation into English was very serious and it was time to do something about it. So, he went on, he was donating \$734,000 to establish a Fund in support of translation. And now we could do something about it. Each year since then the Fund has received about 130 applications from translators into English from around the world for an extraordinary range of projects, and has given 8-10 grants of \$2,000 or \$3,000 each. Since the figure of the translator is at the center of everything I've been talking about, I'd like to introduce you briefly to some of these extraordinary people on the front lines of literary linguistic plurality.

There is Peter Cole, who moved to Jerusalem from New Jersey 20 years ago and became fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic; he translates poetry from both languages — the translations of the medieval Hebrew poetry of Andalusia for which he received our grant were later described in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* as “rivaling the magnificences of Scripture” — and with a group of friends founded a publishing house, Ibis Editions, to publish the literature of the Levant, translated into English from all the Levant's many languages. There is Karen Emmerich, an American woman who spent her junior year of college in Thessaloniki, became fluent in Modern Greek, and now produces marvelous translations of Greek poetry and fiction while working towards a doctorate. There is Elizabeth Winslow who, after earning an MA in translation, made her living as a croupier in the casinos of Las Vegas and, on the side, produced an award-winning translation from the Arabic of the work of a contemporary Iraqi poet. There is British poet George Szirtes, winner of the T.S. Eliot prize for his poetry, who was born in Hungary and makes brilliant translations of fiendishly long and complex Hungarian novels. There is Simon Wickham-Smith the British experimental musician and

occasional member of the Helsinki Computer Orchestra who dabbles in astrology—specializing in the astrology of the transgendered—and also translates from Tibetan and Mongolian. There is Jason Grunebaum, a former International Red Cross worker deployed all over the world from Kosovo to East Timor to Kashmir, who became fluent in Hindi, and now, in addition to writing his own fiction, translates contemporary Hindi fiction (he’s here with us at this Seminar). Also here with us is Wen Huang, a Chinese journalist and speechwriter living in the United States who decided that the best way he could emulate the American oral historian Studs Terkel, whose work he much admires, was by translating into English the work of the contemporary Chinese writers who are similarly documenting the voices and lives of real people in the depths of contemporary China .

Finally, there is an American junior professor of East Asian literature, not here with us today, who received a grant from the PEN Translation Fund last year for his very accomplished translation of an important memoir by a prominent Japanese poet. I met him for the first time last fall, and he told me that before receiving the grant he had been on the verge of abandoning not only that particular project but translation itself altogether. His university was strongly discouraging him from doing any translation, which it viewed as something distinct from “original scholarship,” the publishing companies he approached were uninterested in publishing translations – to this American who has devoted much of his life to Japanese language and civilization, translation had come to seem a dead end street, one he would do best to steer away from. The grant — this tiny bit of money and recognition — changed enough of that to make him resolve to stay with it. And so the translation sphere has one more member.

In his letters to Wilhelm Fleiss, Sigmund Freud stated his conviction that psycho-neurosis is brought about by a failure to translate certain materials, a failure that is brought on by repression, because we are reluctant to enter into the displeasure that the labor of translation brings on. That displeasure might also be called the pain of communication. Translation is arduous, time-consuming, sometimes impossibly challenging, and perhaps sometimes impossible. But what would we lose if we stopped doing it? *Traducere*, the Latin root of the Italian word *traduttore* – as in *traduttore*, *traditore* — originally meant neither to translate nor to betray, but “to go beyond.” The real betrayal lies not in any failing of the translator, but in the failure to translate.