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10-22-2003

Translation and Literature

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Panel: Literary Translation/Literary Criticism

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Recommended Citation

Kim, Ethan W., "Translation and Literature" (2003). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 612.

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October 22, 2003

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Translation and Literature

1.

The motto of the Korean CIA is “We work in the shadows, but we aspire to a sunny place,” and I think this phrase applies nicely to translators in general, and to me especially. In the literary world, every writer—including every novelist, poet, dramatist, critic, and even every editor has his own place—but no place is reserved for the translator. Unlike other writers, his name is often omitted and appears, at best, at the end of the work in small characters in parentheses. Ortega’s words, “among intellectual undertakings, there is no humbler one. Nevertheless, it is an excessively demanding task,” best express the fate of the translator. My personal experience will illustrate why I lament for my miserable fate as a translator. A few years ago, there was an International Symposium for Literature, in which both many famous writers from all over the world, including Wole Soyinka, Gary Snyder, and Korean writers were invited. As a translator of major Korean poetry, I was officially invited to the reception. But when I arrived, I found, to my embarrassment, that my name tag had not been prepared, while other writers’ tags were neatly printed. A person working for the symposium hastily wrote down my name on a spare name tag and handed it to me, with some words of apology. But I was hurt and I wished I had not gone to the party. Even in the book reviews of my translations, I am seldom mentioned. Here also, I am marginalized and pushed into the shadows. Betrayed into oblivion, I retreat into my dark den on which the sun of applause or fame never shines. The labor and pain of translation never pays off, and the most that translators can expect from the reviewers and readers is not to be blamed. Why I cannot quit this ignominious work of translating is a puzzle to which I cannot find an appropriate answer.

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Both Plato’s *Symposium* and *The Bible* tell a similar story of man’s not knowing his proper place and of the consequent punishment. When man had become so powerful as to

become a threat to gods, the Greek gods chastised him by splitting him into two halves, thereby making him long for his other half. Aristophanes explains that this forms the origin of love—the desire to be whole. In Genesis, the tower of Babel stands for man's *hubris*, his desire to be God-like. This time, God baffles man by bringing confusion to his language. Man's universal language disappears, and with it man's ability for true communication. It becomes man's eternal desire. After Babel, no genuine communication with either one's body (love), or one's word, is possible. Cursed into many speaking tongues, we cannot help but take the second best, that is, translation. In this sense, translators are also Babel-builders. But their ambition is destined to fail, because no two languages are the same. Translation is a long process of negotiation between two languages and cultures, and, in this process, the translator cannot help but betray the author and the language. How true and appropriate are the words *Traduttore e traditore*, translator, betrayer. As a double-betrayer of not only God's will, but also of the author and language, he may well live in a dark den of infamy.

3.

Because language is a repository of information about the people who speak and think in that language, the best way to understand them would be to study their literary works. In the present world, many people worry about the extinction of the endangered species. But what is more deadly and dangerous to mankind is the extinction of tribal languages. Once a language disappears, a whole culture associated with that language also disappears, leaving human culture poorer. There is a prediction that only 15 major languages will survive by 2050. As Ms. Minae Mizumura has said, the world in which every person speaks only English would be a terrible place to live. Because Koreans speak and write the Korean language, Korean culture can maintain its identity. As a translator of Korean literature, what is most difficult to me is to translate not the words, but the culture. Let me present an example. If you are invited to a Korean home, you'll probably be amazed at the enormous variety of dishes spread on the table. You may count about 30 different dishes and the table seems to collapse at any minute from their weight. You can easily imagine that the housewife has spent days and maybe weeks preparing this food. But you'll hear these words from her; if I translate her words literally, they mean, "There is

nothing I prepared, but help yourself.” You may wonder how I can eat when she says there is nothing to eat, or if this is nothing, then how much is something? To understand her words, you must understand the Korean culture. We Koreans are taught to respect others and to be humble, and to think that that’s the most important virtue in our social life. In a similar circumstance, an American might have said, “I have spent several days preparing these dishes, so enjoy yourself.” But if I translated the Korean woman’s words like that, her humble tone and attitude would disappear. My poor compromise might be; “This is not much, but I hope you enjoy it.”

Now we enjoy an Indian summer, beautiful warm days in the midst of autumn. It is called Indian summer, because it comes by surprise — like the Indians did at the time of the frontier. Translating these words into Korean is really hard because we have nothing like Indian summer in my country; we have had no such experience. Instead we have the opposite of the Indian summer, very cold days in the midst of spring. We call these days “flower-envying cold,” because the cold envies and kills the new buds. I think that the term reflects the warm hearts of the Korean people who care for the flowers. I am still wondering how I can translate these words into English.

4.

Man’s culture and history are, in a sense, a history of translation. Without translation of the ancient and foreign works and cultures, there would have been no present culture. Cultural interchange and transaction is mediated by the translators. In the literary world, it is they who prepare a fertile soil for a better work. Modern Korean literature is heavily influenced by Western literature that is introduced and translated into Korean by many translators. When I was a junior high school student, I read Korean translations of many Russian and German writers, including Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Hesse, Mann, Goethe, and Rilke. My encounters with these writers were crucial in forming my passion for and ideal of literature. Later, I found that some of the translations were not good, but it did not matter to me at the time. There were some awkward passages and unfamiliar expressions, but they sounded exotic and they instigated my curiosity for their cultures and their way of life. Even now, I recall vividly the moment when a poem written down on a scrap of paper that my friend handed to me, captured my mind. The poem began with the phrase, “Erect no gravestone to her memory; just / let the rose blossom each year for her sake,” and it was about 40 lines long. With some research, I found the poem to be Reiner Maria Rilke’s “Sonnete an Orpheus.” When I read it in German original,

I realized

that the translation was really bad but the gist of the poem was there. I owe my life-long love of Rilke to the anonymous translator of that poem.

In a rapidly globalizing world, the necessity for more translation also has grown. I hope that translation would work as a kind of antidote to “the homogenizing tendencies of American consumer culture,” to use Vladimir Nabokob’s words. Cultural colonialism would be more deadly and harmful than a political or economic one. No culture can last long without cross-fertilization with other cultures. Translation is a window open to the other cultures and people; the understanding of and cooperation with them has never been so vital than it is now. This might be the reason why I cannot stop translating. Even though one of my friends taunted me that the worst curse to the translator is to say “Do nothing but translating until you die,” I was not a bit discouraged. Instead, by using the translator’s creative and outrageous infidelity, I retorted to him, in a Blakean fashion, that curse goes well along with infamy and oblivion and that if you keep going on the road to infamy it may lead you to the road of fame someday.