interstice

2 translation spring/summer 1997

editors Patrick ffrench, Roland-François Lack, Anita Phillips, Bruno Sibona, Burhan Tufail

advisory board Michèle Hannoosh, Annette Lavers, Timothy Mathews, Michael Worton

Is there an art of translation? Is translation necessary, or indeed possible?

Michael Worton

Is translation necessary? This is a strangely old-fashioned - and defensive - question, one which suggests that the debate about translation has not moved far beyond the parameters established in the Renaissance with its concerns for Defences and Illustrations and, indeed, Du Bellay's sagely nodding citation of the Italian maxim *traduttore, traditore*. But why privilege art, even anxiously? Why not ask if there is a science of translation? Or a technology of translation? Or a mechanics of translation? And so on... It would seem to me much more important and interesting to ask what translation is and does, what it can be and do and what it can (often dangerously) become than to agonize about whether or not there is an art of translation. In other words, we should today be asking epistemological, ontological - and political - questions rather than narrowly aesthetic ones.

Is translation necessary, or indeed possible? Of course, it is necessary, and of course, it is possible - although it is undeniable that some things cannot ever be translated, even partially. This is one of the joys, as well as one of the drawbacks, of working in and with language: its self-specificity, which is both challenge and resistance, seduction and alienation. Translation is necessary, so that the text can be read by foreigners to its language and to the culture that grounds and makes it possible; it is necessary also, so that its own inherent difference, its eternal and essential difference from itself, can be exposed - and exploited.

However, I would add that I find the 'indeed' in this question troubling, symptomatic of a reactionary notion of language, of a clinging to some kind of nostalgia for the eternally lost linguistic plenitude of Eden before Adamic naming, before the Fall perhaps, and certainly before Babel. George Steiner is quite right to argue that any attack on translation is only a weak form of an attack on language, although, as he points out trenchantly: 'The defence of translation has the immense advantage of abundant, vulgar fact'

(*After Babel*: 250). Translation *is*, and translation must be. In the case of literary translation, however, and especially perhaps in the case of the translation of poetry, there is the question of the 'finishedness' of the translation and also that of the 'authorial', even 'proprietorial', relationship of the translator not only to the original, but also to his or her 'own' poem. Despite the abiding power of the notion that translation is a mode of uncovering (as in the legend of the Septuagint and the seventy separate but absolutely identical Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible), the translator must surely be an interventionist, not merely a discoverer but an inventor. Subject undoubtedly to a dual anxiety of influence, the translator is always in search of a voice, of a voice between voices and *between* tongues. This voice which is articulated and made to sing by the poet-translator vibrates between two languages and two cultures, yet it must also be an authentic and *singular* voice. Neither the voice of the translator alone nor that of the original poet alone, it is a voice of sharing, of communion, a voice in and of becoming, a voice furthermore that hails and calls the reader to presence in language.