

The Art of Empathy

Celebrating Literature in Translation



National
Endowment
for the Arts

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Preface



Though I grew up in Arkansas, I spent my childhood straddling two cultures. My parents emigrated from China and spoke mostly Mandarin in the house, but they wanted me to assimilate in America and encouraged me to speak English. So I spent a great deal of my time translating from one language to another, which led me to understand the importance of translation and the challenges of translating well. It

is not just a matter of replacing one word with another, but of conveying the essence of what is being said.

By moving between the two cultures, I gained better insight into both. The essays in this collection illuminate how translation fosters this sense of empathy—understanding how people from different countries and cultures might feel and act. As Johanna Warren sagely states in her essay, “Humans have a long and bloody track record of distrusting and devaluing what we do not understand.”

That is why the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been such a strong supporter of literary translation over the years. Bringing other voices to the American public, voices that we might not hear otherwise, makes the country as a whole a better place. Given the wide array of ethnicities and traditions in this country, translation helps bring us together and accept the differences among us.

Since 1981, the NEA has awarded more than \$8 million in grants to translators and organizations publishing translation—one of the most significant investments in literary translation in the country. This is tied intrinsically to the NEA’s mission to provide diverse experiences with art that expand the American public’s horizons as creative, innovative thinkers and citizens of the world.

Please take a look at the fascinating essays in this collection from a variety of translators and publishers. And then take their recommendations and read a book in translation!

Jane Chu
Chairman
National Endowment for the Arts

Introduction



Imagine if no one ever thought to translate for the American public, say, the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, the poetry of Pablo Neruda, or the diary of Anne Frank? Following the death of Gabriel García Márquez earlier this year, thousands of contemporary writers around the world who read his work in their own languages (thanks to translators) went on record about his influence on their writing and thinking, writers as far apart in style as Haitian-American

writer Edwidge Danticat and former U.S. President Bill Clinton. Márquez himself, as a young writer, was profoundly influenced by Franz Kafka, William Faulkner, and Sophocles, all accessible to him because they were translated into Spanish.

Unquestionably, these legendary writers—as well as more contemporary international writers—are fundamental to the richness of our literary canon and our understanding of the global perspective and human condition. Literature provides a “crucial insight into world events from a human perspective,” writes Susan Harris in “Engaging the World.” Yet how many of us can name the translators who brought these writers to our attention? Márquez waited three years for Gregory Rabassa to find the time to translate *One Hundred Years of Solitude* into English; when it was complete, Márquez remarked that he thought it was better than his original Spanish version. In her essay “The Sharable Rightness of Meaning,” Esther Allen tells us about Michael Henry Heim, arguably one of the most well-respected and prolific translators of the last 40 years. I once asked a large group of graduate writing students if they knew who he was and I got blank stares.

Translation is an art. It takes a great deal of creativity and patience to do it well, not to mention a deep knowledge of a writer’s language, place, and oeuvre. But it also takes fortitude, for translators are notoriously underpaid and underappreciated, their names often left off the covers of the books they create.

In fact, we owe a good deal of thanks to a good number of hardworking people and organizations who are (and were) responsible for making translated work available, accessible, and visible to us among the fray, most notably the publishers

who take the financial risk to publish and promote these books in an increasingly crowded market. Over the last 15 years, I've seen more and more of these advocates of translation enter the game, promoting literature in translation not just from across the borders, but from within our own communities. But as Chad Post discusses in "The Myth of the 'Three Percent Problem,'" only a tiny percentage of the books published in the U.S. are works in translation. There are still many authors around the world who have never been translated into English, particularly women writers and writers from Africa. Some of them have been shortlisted for the Nobel Prize many years running. There are statues of them in their own countries, buildings named after them, postage stamps with their pictures, and yet they remain virtually unknown to American audiences.

"Our goal for this book was simple: to illuminate for the general reader the art and importance of translation."

The National Endowment for the Arts has endeavored over the years to address these challenges. Since it began awarding translation fellowships in 1981, the agency has spent more than \$8 million on the publication, presentation, and creation of translated literary work. Through the fellowships program, 364 translators have received grants to translate literature from 66 languages originating in 86 countries. That's impressive, considering the projects must be of the highest artistic excellence and merit. The NEA also supports the publication and promotion of translators and translation books through its grants to organizations and special projects, like this collection of essays. The writers included here are masters of their craft and tireless advocates of translation, but they are by no means the only ones.

Our goal for this book was simple: to illuminate for the general reader the art and importance of translation through a variety of points of view. Each essay tells a different story; each story adds to our understanding of this little-known art form. And in case you read through these passionate essays and find yourself inspired to make the next book you read a work in translation, we've asked each of our contributors to recommend three books. These are not necessarily the quintessential, canonical, must-read translations from an academic point of view, but rather three books that they simply loved and wished to share.

With all the obstacles translators face, it's fair to ask: why do they do it? Some translate out of a sense of obligation, as Charles Waugh discusses in "Work of Purpose, Work of Joy." Many do it because they love the act—diving deep for hours into a text they love—and because they've fallen in love with a book and are driven by the necessity to share it with others. "Translation is a practice of empathy," writes Gregory Pardlo in "Choosing a Twin." "What would the world be like (I ask naively) if our first impulses were to find that part of us that is most like each person we meet?"

It is with great pleasure that we present this anthology, not just to educate on and advocate for the field of translation, but to celebrate its empathetic and inspiring practitioners. To all the translators who make my world a better place and ignite my love of the written word over and over again, I say, *Salut!*

Amy Stolls
Director of Literature
National Endowment for the Arts

I.

Hearing Voices

Angela Rodel



It was love at first sight when my 16-year-old self saw the letters frolicking across the Language Arts bulletin board at my high school, the frilly, coquettish Ж, the cat-tailed Л, and poor “backwards” Я. Of course, like most of the world’s rubes, I thought it was the Russian

alphabet—a mistake that Bulgarians have taken pains to drum out of my head ever since. After all, St. Cyril was a Byzantine with a Bulgarian mother—but who ever sees their beloved as they really are?

Despite my initial confusion, Bulgaria would get me in the end—the Cyrillic alphabet led me to Russian literature and Slavic linguistics, but it took Bulgarian music to unmask my true love for what it really was. As a freshman at Yale, where I was studying linguistics and Russian, I got my first taste of Bulgarian folk singing thanks to the Yale Slavic Chorus. Yet I kept Bulgaria and the Bulgarian language in an idyllic, pastoral mental compartment—while I was cramming my head full of Pushkin and Mayakovsky in Russian class, the only Bulgarian poetry I cared to hear was the “pure” voice of the folk—ballads of a young man gone to the well to meet his sweetheart belted out in a sternum-shattering tone. I was yet another foreigner mesmerized by the mystery of Bulgarian voices.

In 1996, after graduating from Yale in linguistics, I shot over to Sofia on a Fulbright grant to study Bulgarian language and literature at Sofia University—and to study folk singing on the side, of course. But when I landed in that grimy city at the height of an economic and political spasm brought on by hyperinflation and corrupt governance, the “authentic” Bulgarian voice I thought I knew was nowhere to be found; what I had imagined was a vibrant tradition gushing uninhibited from Bulgarian soul was for the most part an institutionalized relic or a K-6 after-school pastime.

The haunting voice of the shepherd had been largely drowned out in the post-socialist cacophony. Yet once I met a couple of poets through musical circles, I tuned in to other voices—those of the shepherds’ great-grandchildren: bohemians chafing at

the strictures of communism, parents trying to figure out how to feed their children despite runaway inflation, young emigrants abandoning the chaos and lawlessness of their home country and losing their sense of self in the process. This was a whole new chorus of Bulgarian voices every bit as intriguing as *le mystere des voix bulgares*—and every bit as powerful.

While the Bulgarian folk music scene may have been somewhat sclerotic, I realized that the literary scene was surprisingly vibrant: it seemed deliciously old world, like Paris of the 1920s, with writers gathered in circles and generations, everyone knowing everyone else (for better or worse). There was a real sense of discourse; readings took place almost every evening, followed by brandy, cigarettes, and feta-cheese-fueled debates in cafes and pubs; in short, here was a literature demonstratively not tamed by the publishing business or shoehorned into MFA writing programs.

In 1997, I reluctantly went back to the U.S. to do graduate work at UCLA in linguistics and ethnomusicology, but maintained a close connection with Bulgarian language and music, returning to Bulgaria almost every summer. In 2004, I received a Fulbright-Hays grant for field research and went back to Bulgaria—and have lived there ever since.

My Recommendations

***Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.**

Any translations by this duo are well worth reading. After struggling through the Russian version and spending two summers in St. Petersburg trying to discover Raskolnikov's haunts, I found their translations—hallelujah! They do a phenomenal job of capturing the atmosphere and flavor of the original.

2666 by Roberto Bolaño, translated from the Spanish by Natasha Wimmer.

An obvious choice, but I've never cackled aloud in delight this often at the purely genius use of language in a translated novel! This strange, long work could get tedious if the translation were anything less than masterful, but Wimmer's creation of distinct voices keeps it rolling forward.

***The Joke* by Milan Kundera, translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim.**

Reading this prolific translator's work on Eastern European fiction got me excited about the field. My own experience in working in a former socialist country has taught me how subtle and delicate the use of language was under these regimes; Heim's translation captures this brilliantly.

After spending years honing my singing voice to sound Bulgarian, I realized the time had come for karmic payback by helping Bulgarian writers find their “sound” in English. There were good translators working from Bulgarian to French and German, but native speakers of English willing and able to

“For me, translation means hearing voices—allowing an author’s voice to sing through my own.”

translate Bulgarian literature were few and far between. Thus for the past decade I have been living and working in Sofia, making it my mission to help Bulgarian literary voices be heard in the English-speaking world. The experience was and continues to be exhilarating—trying to find the right timbre for a short story, adding the perfect lexical ornament, trying to make the text itself sing, without changing the

key entirely or tripping up the beat. For me, translation means hearing voices—allowing an author’s voice to sing through my own, letting Bulgarian rhythms echo inside English syllables, finding the right key that makes a piece of writing resonate.

Because Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire for nearly five centuries, some of the most colorful words in Bulgarian today are Turkish borrowings that, when used in place of their Slavic synonyms, add a facetious flavor, like a good inside joke. Alas, American English has no comparable register, so translating these terms often feels like trying to play Eastern microtonal music on the Western piano, with its 12 rigid tones—I spend much of my translating time searching for the right “blue notes” from an English dialect or jargon to capture this feel. Since I primarily translate prose, I am used to having more instruments at my disposal to create the right harmony or atmosphere that allows the author’s voice to speak—character, plot, dialogue. In poetry, however, the song is a capella, pure voice, form and content locked in the barest hand-to-hand combat. Reading new works—both in the original and in translation—is an endless source for learning new tunes and new moves...but ultimately, the translator needs to let those voices in her head sing.

Angela Rodel is a freelance literary translator living in Sofia, Bulgaria. She has translated works by Milen Ruskov, Zachary Karabashliev, Angel Igov, Virginia Zaharieva, and Ivan Dimitrov. She received an NEA Translation Fellowship in 2014.

Choosing a Twin Gregory Pardlo



The legendary minstrel performer, Bert Williams, was born in Nassau, Bahamas, in 1874. It may seem odd to begin my comments on translation with a reference to Bert Williams (or minstrelsy in general), but there is an analogy

here that I think is instructive. Despite being racially black, Williams not only applied burnt cork to his face, but also had to bridge cultural differences to produce a compelling (however insulting) stage version of the “American Negro.” The character he produced was mostly a product of popular imagination. In other words, Williams was successful at taking “genuine” black expression and translating it into a version that popular audiences wanted to believe was real. He was celebrated not so much because his imitation of African-American speech—which was initially foreign to him—was convincingly “accurate” to his fans, but because he made their illusions come alive. He enlivened the one-dimensional stock character with his own creative force. I may be reaching with this analogy in some ways, but minstrelsy magnifies for us one kind of dramatic illusion that I think literary translation relies upon. When I translate poetry, I have to make the poet whose work I am translating into a character I hope to embody, a character that may not actually exist in English or to English-only readers. And I have to present that character in a way my reader will find full of human complexity without making the character just another version of myself. Yet, if I focus on the language alone—that is, if I focus on translating each word “correctly” as if the poem were a language exam—I risk producing a one-dimensional stereotype of the poet’s native culture. All this is to say “accuracy,” particularly when translating poetry, is not necessarily a desirable outcome.

*

When I have difficulty getting my writing day started, I google poems written in a language I can no sooner translate than tea leaves. I pull a translating dictionary from my shelf in that language if I have one (I’m an avid collector), and attempt

My Recommendations

“Archaic Torso of Apollo,” by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated from the German by Stephen Mitchell.

Rilke’s original sonnet is densely layered and very difficult to render in English without radically changing one or more of the poem’s primary images. For example, a phrase like “wherein the eye-apples ripen” simply refers to a dilating pupil. But its closest colloquial match in English might call to mind “the apple of my eye” which, of course, is trite and schmaltzy. Mitchell foregoes the apple altogether and gives us “eyes like ripening fruit.”

“I, too, Sing America” by Langston Hughes, translated from the English into Spanish by Fernández de Castro.

De Castro subtly, but radically, challenges Hughes’ original intention. As literary scholar Vera Kutzinsky points out, simply by adding an accent—changing “America” to “América,”—de Castro prevents us from associating America with the United States alone. While Hughes’ poem already challenges Walt Whitman’s earlier poem, “I Hear America Singing,” with an appeal to include African Americans, de Castro’s translation of Hughes extends that effort even further to include all within “the Americas.”

I am indebted to Eastern European poetry of the second half of the 20th century because reading the translated work of Tomáš Šalamun, Czesław Miłosz, or Wisława Szymborska, for example, continues to broaden my understanding of U.S. poetry of the same period. It wasn’t until I began exploring the Eastern European poets that I was able to come back to the poetry I had been reading my whole life with new eyes.

translations as a way to massage my brain out of those ruts where one idea predictably leads to another. Translating helps me in this very practical sense. It is the mental yoga that clears the mind and makes way for my own creativity.

*

In his essay, “A Few Don’ts,” Ezra Pound wrote, “Let the [novice poet] fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover, preferably in a foreign language so that the meaning of the words may be less likely to divert his attention.” Pound was not talking about translation here. He was talking about a poet’s apprenticeship in the art, but his advice has implications for translators. He recommended poets listen deeply to poems written in languages they may not comprehend, because that way it is easier to study the musical effects of a composition without being distracted by the poem’s meaning or content.

*

Translating the meanings of words is the least difficult task a poetry translator faces; it’s the proverbial tip of the iceberg. The unique musicality each poet has—let’s call it style—is just as, if not more,

important than what her poems “say” (otherwise they would be prose). A poem in translation must stand on its own as a poem, not as a translation. If, while reading a poem I translated, the lay reader—one who is not herself a translator, for example—stops at any point either to praise or criticize the quality of the translation; if the lay reader is made conscious of the fact that she is reading a poem in translation, I will not have done my job.

*

When I met Niels Lyngsø, the poet whose work I translated and for which I was awarded a grant from the NEA, we understood that our bond was like something out of science fiction. He understood that I had cloned him (in the metaphysical sense), and he respected how much of myself I had had to rearrange to make room for that imaginary guest to exist in my head, that I was willing to set aside my ego to the extent that I could graft his thoughts onto mine. It is necessarily an intimate relationship. I had become Niels’ “Bizarro” twin—minus any nasty plans of overthrowing civilization.

“Translation is a practice of empathy, like choosing a twin, where affinity and kinship is a declarative act and not a passive discovery.”

*

Translation is a practice of empathy, like choosing a twin, where affinity and kinship is a declarative act and not a passive discovery. What would the world be like (I ask naively) if our first impulses were to find that part of us that is most like each person we meet?

*

As a Russian exile in America, the poet Joseph Brodsky was separated from his parents for the last 12 years of their lives. Brodsky memorialized them in his essay, “In A Room and a Half,” which doubles as a kind of memoir. He penned his remembrances in English instead of his native Russian quite

deliberately. By telling his family story in his adopted language, he gave his parents a symbolic presence in America, in defiance of the Russian government which had steadfastly denied them permission to visit their only son in the U.S. Having been denied giving them even a proper farewell, Brodsky shared his new life with his parents by translating their late lives into English, the language he expected would bear his own legacy forth into posterity. English becomes a family plot, of sorts. A story of posthumous liberation from Russia, the land of their birth, and its pitiless bureaucracy. I find the process of translating a poet's work often carries with it this sort of memorial function, whether that poet is alive or not. The translation carries with it the looming awareness that we are not present to the original poem bearing the poet's living breath. But we are also moved to celebrate the poem's rebirth in a new tongue (if not a new language); the translator is midwife to his own offspring.

Gregory Pardlo is an associate editor for the literary journal Callaloo and a contributing editor for Painted Bride Quarterly in addition to being a widely published poet and translator. He received an NEA Translation Fellowship in 1996 and has served on NEA grants panels.

Work of Purpose, Work of Joy

Charles Waugh



I became a translator out of a sense of obligation, of doing what had to be done. It was 2005 and I'd been living in Hanoi since the previous August, having come with my wife and two-year-old son on a Fulbright fellowship to teach for a year in the Department of International Studies at Vietnam National University. The department had requested someone to help them with their

fledgling American Studies program, to teach some classes and to collaborate with their faculty on course development.

By then it had been ten years since the U.S. normalized relations with Vietnam. We had already logged more than a decade of cooperation on locating missing remains, economic engagement had blossomed, and Bill Clinton's visit in 2000 helped perpetuate the sense that our two countries were putting the past behind us and moving forward together into prosperity and the future. No doubt this optimism played into the timing of the inauguration of the university's American Studies program. The Vietnamese seemed determined to know more about us.

This optimism had also led many Vietnamese to believe that the time was right to put one last remaining ghost of war to rest. In 2004, a group called the Vietnamese Association of Victims of Agent Orange sued the U.S. chemical defoliant manufacturers, alleging they had violated international law and committed war crimes since they knew the defoliants contained abnormally high levels of dioxin but delivered them to the U.S. military anyway. But in March 2005, the suit was dismissed on the basis that—very strictly speaking—no actual law had been broken.

My students at VNU could not understand the ruling. They could not understand how something so straightforward could have gone so wrong. U.S. veterans had been compensated. Why wouldn't some similar kind of justice apply to the Vietnamese? I struggled to explain how the U.S. legal system worked, how a settlement differed from a conviction, and how the pressures the corporations felt in 1984 from an outraged domestic public compared to the lack of pressure the situation presented 20

My Recommendations

***Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*, translated from the Nom by John Balaban.**

Ho Xuan Huong's poems are remarkable for many reasons: she wrote in Nom, an ideographic (and now nearly lost) version of the Vietnamese language at a time when only men wrote in Vietnam, and nearly all of them wrote in Chinese; almost all of the poems contain double entendres; many of her poems can be read vertically as well as horizontally, or by beginning at any spoke of the ones shaped like wheels and going in either direction. Such incredible sophistication and cleverness, of course, makes them practically impossible to translate. Unless, of course, you happen to be John Balaban.

***Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett.**

Garnett has been criticized by many for her translations of Russian literature, and I am not a reader of Russian, but I will say that reading her version of *Notes from Underground* thrilled me. She has captured a version of the underground man who is repulsive, intensely strange, and charming all at the same time.

***The Art of Peace* by Morihei Ueshiba, translated from the Japanese by John Stevens.**

Like the *Tao Te Ching*, the lessons in *The Art of Peace* read like poems, and John Stevens has rendered them in a simple, perfect diction that keeps all their compact power intact.

years later from victims most Americans had never even thought of once.

I wasn't the first to notice this lack of consideration for the Vietnamese. Many books have explored the countless ways Americans made the Vietnamese invisible as we pondered the war—rendering them as absent, agentless gunfire in the movies for example—and collectively constructed the ego-soothing idea that we had somehow defeated ourselves. I realized what Americans needed most was to hear stories of how the Vietnamese suffered because of the war.

Americans needed to feel the ache and the loss of these ruined lives, needed to understand that the war didn't just mean bullets tearing flesh, but also the daily agony of painful birth defects and the terror of being pregnant after having been exposed to one of the most teratogenic compounds on earth. Even though just about everyone I knew at home had some uncle or cousin or father or neighbor who'd served, and most of that group knew someone who'd been damaged by exposure to Agent Orange, no one I knew had reasoned that if our veterans had been exposed, the Vietnamese exposure must have been hundreds of times worse. No one I knew had any inkling of how that kind of

fear must have rippled through society as Vietnamese veterans returned home and began to start families. And I realized, they should. And as someone who could read Vietnamese, and who had some knack for writing in English, I reasoned if I didn't make it happen, maybe no one else would.

So I launched a plan with a professor of literature from VNU named Nguyen Lien to collect and translate all the Vietnamese short fiction and a few seminal nonfiction essays about suffering from dioxin exposure. We received a grant from the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences, and we went to work producing *Family of Fallen Leaves*, which the University of Georgia Press published in 2010. Since then, it's been acquired by libraries all over the United States and has been adopted in many university courses. Of course, it didn't make the bestseller list. But at least it's out there now. It exists, in English, ready to be found by any American who ever wonders what that part of our history entails, ready to make them really feel what that horror was like for the Vietnamese.

And for me personally, the project opened up a whole new sense of purpose and possibility. What Americans don't know about Vietnam is an endlessly rich field to work in, and while I always thought my career would involve writing *about* Vietnam to help bridge that cultural divide, now I realized I could keep writing about Vietnam but also be a conduit through which Vietnamese writers could reach American audiences directly, representing themselves with their own voices.

It was with this sense of appreciation for voices, and particularly new ones, reflecting new perspectives, that Lien and I began our current project to extend Americans' sense of Vietnam by translating stories from young Vietnamese writers who have been influenced more by globalization, cable TV, and hip-hop than guns and grenades. Through my work on the *New Voices from Viet Nam* project, I've met young writers from all over the country, and seen with new eyes the country I thought I'd already come to know so well.

It's also with this project that I've come to relish the joy of translating. The work unfolds and refolds like origami. As the

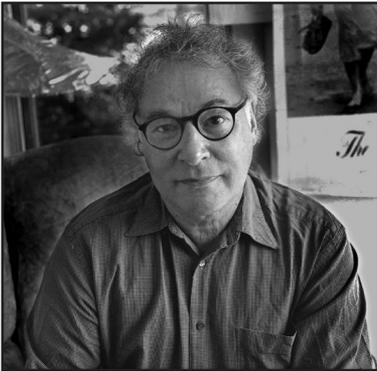
“What started out for me as an obligation has transformed into something that gives me great fulfillment.”

words in one language fall away, they reappear in another, and when those folds line up perfectly, when each word aligns with just the right counterpart, when every sentiment or idiom has been rendered into another language but with all its otherworldly, strange glory intact, the work has a shapeliness to it that is deeply satisfying. In a similar fashion, what started out for me as an obligation has transformed into something that gives me great fulfillment. For me, translation is the perfect union of joyful, purposeful work.

Charles Waugh is an English professor at Utah State University and a former Fulbright Fellow, and has translated the 2010 anthology Family of Fallen Leaves with Nguyen Lien (under the pen name of Huy Lien). He received an NEA Translation Fellowship in 2013 for a new anthology on contemporary Vietnamese authors.

Living With Translation

Howard Norman



I want here to write very personally about translation. About living with translation. In my Vermont village, my nearest neighbors are translators: poet Jody Gladding translates French prose and David Hinton translates ancient Chinese poetry. Same village but further away, lives Ron Padgett, eminent translator of

Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire, and conversations with Marcel Duchamp. My “mentors” — an insufficient word — are two of the most estimable translators in our literature, Jerome Rothenberg and William Merwin. (W.S. Merwin originally looked at my fledgling translations of Inuit poems and folktales during a snow blizzard in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1974). My first teaching position at UCLA was advocated by the brilliant translator, Michael Henry Heim; during that semester, he had begun to translate Bohumil Hrabal’s *Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age*.

One of the most succinct and poignant meditations on the art of translation can be found in the scholar-translator Clarence Brown’s introduction to *The Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam*, where he writes, “(Robert) Lowell does not translate into English, but into Lowell; Nabokov can be said to translate into literal English only by those who will accept his definition of literal English: in reality, it is Nabokov. Merwin has translated Mandelstam into Merwin. When one is speaking of writers of the stature of Lowell, Nabokov, and Merwin, this strikes me as being the happiest of situations. We have tried to translate Mandelstam into the English that works as an instrument of poetry in our own time, and we have accepted the responsibility entailed in the fact that to translate is to change. Those of my colleagues in the academy who are sent up the wall by ‘mistakes’ in the translation of poetry, those who are happy to maintain that poetry is untranslatable here on earth, and the arbiters of their own brand of literalism everywhere, have probably by now read far enough in this book.”

My Recommendations

Montauk by Max Frisch,
translated from the German by
Robin Skelton.

Anton Chekhov: A Life in Letters,
translated from the Russian by
Rosamund Bartlett and Anthony
Phillips.

A Fool's Life by Ryunosuke
Akutagawa, translated from the
Japanese by Will Peterson.

Translation is, as Anton Chekhov wrote in a letter, “the art of existing in two languages at once.” The hope would be that a translator exists in each language in equal measure, for, as Merwin wrote, the challenge is to find “equivalents, not substitutes” for the original. Translators can often get help in comprehending the original language—the question is, how well do they know their own language. As Paul Blackburn, translator of *Poem of the Cid* and Federico García Lorca, wrote: “A translator has to get into the head of another poet and look at the world through that poet’s eyes.”

A passionate reading life is dignified by works in translation, just as excellent translations dignify the imaginative life of any civilization. That makes for so obvious a recognition that I simply think of it as the truth. Over the past four months I have, as it turned out, read or reread only works in translation, including the following: *The Diary of Helena Morley*, translated by Elizabeth Bishop; *Four Chinese Classics*, translated by David Hinton; *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert*, translated by Paul Auster; and from our most prolific translator from French, Richard Howard, *Mourning Diary* by Roland Barthes.

I wish the notebooks of translators were as available

to us as the notebooks of novelists and poets. There is a vast, undiscovered—and I cannot help but believe indispensable—archive of the journals and notebooks of translators out there in the world. I would love to edit an anthology of such works. I have a list a mile long of wonderful translators I'd ask to participate, if they even kept such a thing as a translator's journal. For this dream project, I would start with Howard Hibbet, in order to address his translation of Junichiro Tanizaki's *The Key* and *Diary of a Mad Old Man*. Then, Suzanne Jill Levine (translator of Manuel Puig, Cabrera Infante, editor of Penguin's Borges editions), and Robert Hass (translator of Bashō, Issa, Buson, Miłosz) in order to discuss, well, everything.

“Translators can often get help in comprehending the original language—the question is, how well do they know their own language.”

I have a 98-page journal which chronicles my attempt, in October 1978, to translate a single poem by Lucille Amorak, an Inuit woman (her dialect was Quagmiriut, spoken along the western coast of Hudson Bay); it is essentially a diary of the process of translation as quotidian life. As we recorded, transcribed, and worked through dozens of drafts, you can hear on the tape recorder the preparing of arctic char, the talk and laughter of little children, a snoring uncle on a cot in the corner, cold rain on the tin roof. After 66 drafts, Lucille said, “Why not come back in a year and we can try again.” Which I did. That one poem.

In 2007, under the sponsorship of *National Geographic*, I retraced haiku master Matsuo Bashō's *Okunohosomichi* (“Narrow Road to Far North Towns”)—in the main a walking journey. About the town of Hojinnoie, where Bashō composed:

Fleas, lice
a horse peeing
near my pillow

(translated by Robert Hass)

my journal entry reads: *My first night in Hojinnoie, I have dinner with three scholars who are staying at my ryokkan. They each have excellent English. After tea, I set out 27 English-language versions*

of Okunohosomiche on the table. "Twenty-seven!" one scholar says. "This is quite impressive. Your translators are trying so hard!" There is a heated, in the main good-natured debate, incrementally fueled by sake, about this one Bashō haiku. "No-no—we have differing opinions—the horse peeing sound didn't wake him, he was already awake, scratching at fleas, and that's when he heard the sound." "No, the order isn't important. Bashō suffered insomnia anyway. It was the reduced circumstances, the primitive circumstances of sleeping in the stable that's most important here." "I think eventually Bashō is laughing here—fleas, lice, horse-peeing, all equally gave him the haiku." One fellow slowly recites the haiku in Japanese: "nomi shirami/uma no shitosuru/makura moto," then writing it down for me, says, "The name of the barrier nearby, Shitomae, in your English means, 'before the urine.' Bashō must have thought about that, eh?" On and on; two bottles of sake; a third bottle; up all night; first thing in the morning we all go back to the stable and one by one lie down in front of the wooden-horse replica and have a photograph taken.

Then the most esteemed of the scholars said, "I've been working for more than twenty years on a translation of the letters of Joseph Conrad. I have never been to sea. I have never been to England. I really must visit Conrad's grave in Canterbury and speak to him. Still, I have read the letters in English. I have every collection of them. My university helps me, but they are getting a little impatient. But I say, 'Translation can take a lifetime.'"

Howard Norman is the author of seven novels, three memoirs, and several translations, including Algonquin, Cree, and Inuit poetry and folklore. He has received many awards for his writing and translation, and received two NEA Translation Fellowships in 1981 and 1985.

II.

The Collaborative Approach

Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Howard Goldblatt



The vast majority of literary translations, certainly those carried out in English, are accomplished by single translators, working alone and calling upon whatever resources are at hand to turn out the best possible new version

of a foreign novel, short story, poem, or play. Since virtually all the foreign works emerge from the pens/laptops of individuals, the single translator makes sense. But, like Lerner and Loewe, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and McCartney and Lennon in music, collaborative endeavors work as well in literary translation, with two additional virtues: They can expand the pool of available practitioners by allowing people unschooled or inadequately prepared in the original language to participate in the process; and they foster, even require, a continual dialogue about what a work means, what it does, and how it performs in the new language.

The requirements for collaborative translation are straightforward: two (rarely more) individuals work together to turn a literary text into another language. Oftentimes only one member of the team is familiar with the language from which the translation is executed—sometimes known as the “source” language. That likely works better in poetry, where narrative flow, structure, and more seem to matter somewhat less than in prose. Poets can enhance the level of prosody in renderings by those who can read the original text, and many poets have succumbed to the temptation to aid in the translation of the language from which the authors of the current essay translate: Chinese. That includes Ezra Pound, Kenneth Rexroth, and Octavio Paz, who once delivered this cautionary note: “In theory only poets should translate poetry; in practice, poets are rarely good translators. They almost invariably use the foreign poem as a point of departure toward their own.”

In prose, translation teams are formed in three ways:

- 1) One member is native or near native in the language of the text to be translated and acts as an informant. The second member, unschooled in the

language of the original text, turns the “crib” into a finished translation. The most significant limitation in this arrangement, of course, is that the informant has difficulties clarifying the levels of ambiguity in the original word, phrase, or context.

2) One member is native or near native in the source language, while the second member, who has some understanding of that language and the culture, discusses the choices as understanding permits, and turns the results into a finished translation. This more common arrangement seems more purely collaborative, in that there is a degree of linguistic/cultural commonality.

“Consanguinity, shared interests, and a need to get along enhance the possibility of amicable success.”

3) Both members are fluent in both languages, with one native or near native in each of the two languages. While disagreements in collaborative translation are unavoidable, in this arrangement both members are well prepared to argue their case effectively and understandably.

There is a fourth category, one with advantages and disadvantages. That is when a translator works with the author of the text. In our view the disadvantages outweigh the advantages, for the translator must be the final arbiter on word choice, format, etc., and that is a tough pill for a writer to swallow. Using an author as a consultant can be fruitful, particularly with difficult, obscure, or locally grounded texts, but the translator must have the freedom and authority to decide how a work is rendered.

Now, permit us to get personal: Sylvia Li-chun Lin, a native of Taiwan fluent in Mandarin, graduate of an American university, and a former professor of Chinese, has teamed up with Howard Goldblatt, fluent in Chinese with native fluency in English to translate Chinese novels into English. That we are a married couple helps insure our success. Consanguinity, shared interests, and a need to get along enhance the possibility of amicable success.

The selection of texts originates from works of fiction offered to us by publishers, writers, agents, or colleagues/friends. For those that are not commissioned, Sylvia reads all or part of

Our Recommendations

***Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, translated from the English into Chinese by Yuan-ren Chao.**

He brilliantly replicates the puns and other thought-by-some-un-translatable aspects of this classic. Even the mirror “trick” works in this imaginative recreation.

***Dead Souls* by Nikolai Gogol.**

Any of three recent translations of Gogol’s masterpiece of Russian satire: Pevear and Volokhonsky (1996) is the liveliest, Robert Maguire’s 2004 rendering is the most conservative, and Donald Rayfield’s latest (2012) appears to be the most authoritative. Take your pick and enjoy.

***The Elegance of the Hedgehog* by Muriel Barbery, translated from the French by Alison Anderson.**

A highly allusive, smart, and witty novel focusing on a concierge, a deceptively wise woman, and a Japanese resident of the building. If you liked Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day*, you’re sure to like this one.

likely candidates, followed by selected readings by Howard, and the conversation begins. We try to anticipate challenges and strategies regarding the novel or stories, a discussion that deals with such aspects as names, foreign terms, tone, and the desired pace. Our understanding of the market and audience plays a role, though not a decisive one. Then it’s time to get to work. While some translation teams opt to work on a text together, line by line, we prefer to alternate for the early drafts.

Sylvia does the first draft, placing emphasis more on conveying the meaning of the original text than on finding the exact words/phrases in the translation. The rough quality of the text, necessitated by speed, is easily compensated for by first-impression impulses that capture meaning beyond the words. Howard takes over then, reading the first draft against the original, marking spots with different interpretations, possible translations, or ambiguities, and checking reference material where necessary. The text at this point is replete with “either/or” renderings. Here is where we hammer out the most appropriate renditions with frequent reference to the original. It is also where the delineation of authority is most obvious. While agreements far outstrip disagreements, when

the latter occur, Sylvia has the last word regarding meaning of the original, while Howard is the tsar of expression. When no satisfactory conclusion can be reached or further problems arise, an inquiry can be sent to the author for clarification. At this point, we refer less to the original (though it resides in ways big and small in our heads) and concentrate on clarity and readability, reading portions aloud to hear how we have done. Once this stage is complete, we put the manuscript aside for a while before going back to put the finishing touches on the translation, checking with the original when doubts arise, before sending it to the publisher to await the next collaborative effort, that between editor and translator.

It has been our experience that collaborative translations require more time and effort than those by individuals. All the work, from selecting the text to be translated to putting the final touches on the new work, is duplicated with no commensurate lessening in the time required to perform each stage. Collaborations, while less commonly undertaken than single-translator efforts, are gaining popularity. It's good to have someone to high-five with at the end.

Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Howard Goldblatt have collaborated on several translations, including Notes of a Desolate Man by Chu T'ien-wen as well as having translated many books on their own. They each received NEA Translation Fellowships (Lin, 2013; Goldblatt, 1992, 2004) and were the translation co-editors of the NEA anthology Push Open the Window: Contemporary Poetry from China.

By the Light of Translation

Natasha Wimmer



The second section of Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* ends with a conversation between Amadeo Salvatierra, an avant-garde poet of advanced years, and two young poets. After a long night of talk over a bottle of mezcal, Amadeo asks, "Boys, is it worth it? Is it worth it? Is

it really worth it?" and one of the poets mumbles "*Simonel*." We don't know exactly what Amadeo is asking, but we can presume that at some level he means: Is poetry worth it? Is the pursuit of literature worth it? Have our lives been worth anything? Clearly, much rests on the translation of "*simonel*," which is an ambiguous Mexico City slang term. Earlier in the novel, another character asks plaintively "If *simón* is slang for yes and *nel* means no, then what does *simonel* mean?" This sole prior mention seems to indicate that "*simonel*" is intentionally ambiguous, and that the simple solution to the problem is to translate "*simonel*" as "*simonel*," since the reader has already been given enough information to draw his own conclusions. But when I inquired, at least one of my informants said that "*simonel*" *was* a mix of yes and no, but that it really meant yes. Was Bolaño playing with *yes* and *no* only to come down ultimately on the side of *yes*? Or was it *I don't know* shaded with *yes*? Or simply *I don't know*?

Translating is a kind of writing, of course, but it's also a kind of reading: a very, very slow kind of reading—possibly the slowest kind of reading in the world. First of all, you read the book (probably: Gregory Rabassa, one of the great translators of the 20th century, claimed never to read a book all the way through before he translated it). Then you sit down and face the first sentence. You read it. You come up with a preliminary approximation of meaning (this may be instantaneous and unconscious or slow and laborious). You set out to transfer that meaning into English. You tack away from the Spanish at one angle. You tack away at another. You feel the pull of the Spanish on the English. You break free from the Spanish. You check the Spanish again: the English is true but it stands on its own, an independent refraction of the original.

By stretching the Spanish in every possible direction, testing the limits of meaning, considering every possible nuance, you've done something to the Spanish. It feels baggier, more accommodating. The critic George Steiner puts it beautifully: "Every schoolchild, but also the eminent translator, will note the shift...which follows on a protracted or difficult exercise in translation: the text in the other language has become almost materially thinner, the light seems to pass unhindered through its loosened fibers." It's an exhilarating feeling, but according to Steiner, it's also exactly what's wrong with the act of translation. Nothing is allowed to remain unarticulated or unexplained in the translator's mind; the translator—famously—isn't allowed to skip. Even when she decides to replicate the obliqueness of a phrase, she has to be conscious of every implication of its obscurity; its unknowableness must be precisely calibrated. The glare of the translator's lamp dispels the suggestive murk of the text.

The translator and scholar David Bellos tells a story about trying to read Hegel at a library in Germany. Unable to make any headway, he glances over at the German student in the next carrel. This student is also reading Hegel—but in English. In the bright light of translation,

My Recommendations

All three of my picks are books I first read as a teenager (in fact, before I was even aware of reading in translation) and have since reread at least once.

***Claudine at School* by Colette, translated from the French by Antonia White.**

Colette's autobiographical first novel, the story of a Burgundy schoolgirl. The descriptions of nature are rapturous, and Claudine is a memorable character: precocious, malicious, a bit of a sadist.

***Nada* by Carmen Laforet, translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman.**

Another schoolgirl story, though Andrea, the protagonist of *Nada*, is a university student. In post-Civil War Spain, she comes to live with her eccentric extended family in a freezing, crumbling flat in Barcelona. Her sufferings are both physical and existential—she nearly starves to death and must come to terms with the madness and cruelty of those around her.

***Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.**

I picked this up last year to take a look at Pevear and Volokhonsky's translation and couldn't put it down. I read the novel as a teenager in a different translation and sympathized with Alexei Karenin (Anna struck me as selfish). This time around, I was less partisan and simply marveled at Tolstoy's ability to observe shades of human behavior.

a difficult philosophical text is rendered more comprehensible. Did the translator set out to clarify? Almost certainly not. But the very resourcefulness of translation, its inclination to seek the best possible English equivalent, has resulted in a more transparent text.

“The author is allowed to write intuitively, sometimes blindly—the translator is not.”

In a way, the translator must know the text better than the author. The author is allowed to write intuitively, sometimes blindly—the translator is not. The translator must translate consciously, deliberately. I don’t think this is wrong. It’s simply the nature of translation. And it tells us something about the difference between writers and translators,

between original works and translations. The translated work isn’t (and can’t be) the object itself; it is a reading, an act of seeing.

It was 2005 when I began the translation of *The Savage Detectives*, a few years after Bolaño’s death, so I couldn’t ask Bolaño what he meant by “simonel.” For a while, I was convinced that it had to be *yes*, partly because it was the bolder choice, and it seemed to mirror the leap Bolaño makes at the end of the novel. After a lot of wandering, *The Savage Detectives* ends in a startling and somehow life-affirming display of violence, and “*yes*” seemed an equally explosive conclusion on a more abstract level. In fact, in looking back at an early draft, I see that I initially translated it as “absolutely”—“boys, is it worth it? is it worth it? is it really worth it? and the one who was asleep said *Absolutely*.” But I grew uneasy with this solution. Bolaño’s poets are heroic figures, but also tragicomic, deluded, and grandiose. This ambivalence—the sense that to be a writer is both vital and absurd—is central to Bolaño’s writing. And of course there was the earlier reference to “simonel,” the only hard evidence I had.

I don’t regret the choice to stick with “simonel” (yet, at least). But I do relish the glimpse of the novel that I got in the light of “absolutely.” Translation may momentarily render the foreign text thinner, but it also reminds us of the richness of fiction, of the many possible readings it permits and encourages.

Natasha Wimmer has translated many authors from Spanish, including Mario Vargas Llosa, Petros Juan Gutiérrez, and Roberto Bolaño. She received an NEA Translation Fellowship in 2007 to translate Bolaño’s epic novel 2666, which won the PEN Translation Prize in 2009.

An Act of Imagination

Philip Boehm



In truth I am an impostor, a theater director masquerading as a translator. (Incidentally the fact I consider translation my “day job” says a lot about working in the theater.) And over the years I’ve come to the conclusion that the two trades have a lot in common. They both involve taking a written text from one place to another. And they both begin with an act of imagination.

Theater always happens right here and now: the live event is what moves the audience

to laugh or cry or walk out dazed. The written play is all about potential, much like a musical score or perhaps a chemical formula that tells us when A comes into contact with B there will be a release of energy. The director’s job is to summon the world of the play onstage and catalyze that release.

Translators do much the same thing: we first distill the potential of the original, then conjure its world in another language, another time, another place. And both translators and directors have to cope with a shifting cultural context. Plays by Tennessee Williams seem quite concrete in St. Louis but a bit more abstract in Kyoto. Kafka’s *Trial* was read differently by Eastern European dissidents than by American professors. And when Joseph Brodsky toured as Poet Laureate of the United States, he would read the same poem in Russian and in English, shifting from fairly flat delivery for the former to dramatic declamation more suited to his native tongue.

Every performance requires long periods of training and rehearsal to ensure that it stays grounded in the reality being created on stage. Such grounding is also essential work for translators, so that the re-creation of the original text remains so securely and deeply rooted that it can achieve a life of its own. Clearly the first step in this process is to understand the language of the original—and not merely vocabulary, syntax, and grammar, but the personality of that language.

For example, working in German, I am constantly amazed

My Recommendations

***The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, translated from the Persian by Edward FitzGerald.**

This translation first cast its spell as my father recited “The Moving Finger writes...” around the house.

***Osip Mandelstam: Selected Poems*, translated from the Russian by David McDuff.**

This bilingual edition from 1975 was my introduction to the poet, in a class taught by the late professor Charles Isenberg. The book (and the seminar) launched a lifelong fascination with Mandelstam.

***Winnie-the-Pooh* by A.A. Milne, translated from English to Polish by Irena Tuwim.**

I’m clearly not the only one taken with Tuwim’s 1938 translation’s hugely imaginative and playful rendering: when Warsaw was being rebuilt, readers of the 1954 *Evening Express* were given a chance to name a newly designed block in the heart of the city. They chose “Winnie-the-Pooh Street”—one of the few street names that has survived intact through all the country’s political changes.

at how easily words—and especially nouns—can cluster and conglomerate to capture abstract concepts or define objects with microscopic specificity. It’s like a giant Lego set you can take apart and rebuild any way you want. Slavic languages, on the other hand, use painfully complicated declensions, which in fact allow for a suspended tension even in descriptive passages. Spanish shows a tolerance or even a predilection for ornament and flourish that might raise many an Anglo-Saxon eyebrow, but any reader of Lorca knows what great depths there can be in the very surface of that language.

The better we know the source, the better we are able to perceive linguistic subtleties, and if we’re writing into English, then English is the language we need to know best. And perhaps the Anglophone’s greatest linguistic treasure is our prodigious and amazingly nuanced vocabulary, although this same great fortune can be a source of enormous frustration. “*Himmel*” in German might mean either “sky” or “heaven” or both—but we often have to choose one or the other. The trick here is to view the choice not as a sacrifice but as an opportunity. In a longer work, I keep a scale in the back of my head, and if one of the multiple

meanings has been given short shrift I'll look for an opportunity to insert it elsewhere, to keep the whole in balance. But the more informed I am about where this novel, this poem, this testimony, or this play is coming from, the better I'm able to choose.

Familiarity with the author's other works is of course also of great benefit, as this can help us map his or her inner world, and with some writers that is essential. There's a moving scene in Herta Müller's novel *The Hunger Angel* having to do with a handkerchief, but the power of that scene was all the deeper for me because I had also worked on her Nobel speech, where she develops a handkerchief given to her by her mother into a kind of personal icon of human connection and care.

“What allows us to summon a new creation from the original and give it a life of its own is our empathetic imagination.”

So: each text is different, and each text should be approached from many angles at once. Linguistic proficiency, thorough research, and the careful weighing of words are all necessary. But they are not sufficient. Because what allows us to summon a new creation from the original and give it a life of its own is our empathetic imagination.

First there is the process of active envisioning. Is the window casement or sash? Hackney carriage or landau? Oxford brogue or Blucher? To translate Rafik Schami's book *Damascus Nights* I had to picture how people sat to eat in Syria during the late 1950s—and incidentally that was an excruciating exercise because his evocation of tastes and smells was so effective I was constantly hungry.

But for me perhaps the most important step is hearing the voice—or voices—of the original and impersonating it in another. My work in the theater has led me to a concept of “hearing workshops.” Actors typically spend a lot of time training their vocal technique, and that's incredibly important, but the best projection in the world won't help if the performer doesn't hear the line in his or her head. The same holds true for translation: no matter what the genre, the first thing I do is put my ear to the text. Next I close my eyes and let the music play until I hear the melody and rhythm of the writing. Sometimes this takes repeated readings and sometimes it happens right away. Then I try to find the proper key in English—transposing

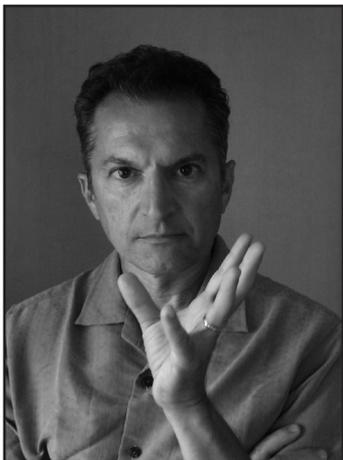
as needed, while always paying careful attention to the musical rests, so that I may also render any silences lurking between the phrases. In his beautiful poem “Silentium,” Osip Mandelstam compares silence to the unborn Aphrodite (Останься пеной, Афродита, И, слово, в музыку вернись...) whom he calls upon to “remain as foam,” to return the word to a primal music—and it is this music that we translators must hear in order to summon new words, new beginnings.

We isolate elements, we distill, we re-create. We have a whiff of the charlatan about us. I suppose all translators are alchemists at heart.

Philip Boehm is a playwright, theater director, and translator. He founded the Upstream Theater in St. Louis, Missouri, and his plays include Soul of a Clone, The Death of Atahualpa, and Return of the Bedbug. He has translated works by Christoph Hein, Gregor von Rezzori, Hanna Krall, and Stefan Chwin, among others. Boehm received an NEA Translation Fellowship in 2008 and has served on NEA grants panels.

Daring and Doubting

Russell Scott Valentino



“What is doubt? You don’t believe in doubt.”

Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*

I remember a talk given by Michael Henry Heim in which he was asked by an admirer how he dared to translate from such a variety of different languages. He very quickly turned the innocent question into an occasion for self-critique, asking of himself not *how do you dare* but *how dare you!*? It was a fine illustration of the subtle inflections in Heim’s

communication, the little gems of irony and innuendo that sparkled in his speech, his letters, and, most of all, his many translations. But it was also a serious question, suggesting a deep suspicion from outside—can you really know enough to do that?—and a potentially productive doubt from inside—can I really know enough to do this?

For what does knowing enough mean, if not having a solid grasp of a foreign language, its grammar and syntax, its sound possibilities, regionalisms, slang, and idioms, all from the period in which one’s source text was written, and also having a thorough understanding of its genre, its historical forms and variations, the poetics of the period in question, not to mention the author’s range and experience, and then—pivoting 180 degrees in the changeable manner that translation critics ironically associate with being faithful—knowing at least as much or more about the linguistic and literary traditions of the receiving culture, its poetics, and genres, and sound possibilities, and so on? And not just knowing about them but being able to manipulate them, which means creating literature within the receiving culture’s conventions, handling pace or the sense of an ending, writing snappy dialogue, purple or minimalist prose, differentiated voices, and finding or creating metaphors, sayings, and turns of phrase appropriate to language users of different ages and cultures, a 20-year-old homeless man in a coastal resort, for instance, or a 60-year-old widow on an inland farm. Doubt in

My Recommendations

***Too Loud a Solitude* by Bohumil Hrabal, translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim.**

Heim is always good at making things seem simple but this book is often overlooked, it seems to me.

***Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin, translated from the Russian by James Falen.**

I have taught multiple translations of this work and made comparisons of them all. Falen's is the best. He makes the language seem effortless, which is exactly what Pushkin does, as if you're looking at a parquet floor from one end of a room. All you see from that angle is the sheen. When you look from above, you see all the intricate detail and you can't help but marvel at how it all fits together.

***I Never Dared Hope for You* by Christian Bobin, translated from the French by Alison Anderson.**

Again, elegance and apparent ease come to mind. But here it's nonfiction, and there's more lyricism involved, maybe even more lyricism than in Pushkin's verse. Alison has a really good feel for it, and here language is so beautiful in places you just feel like crying.

such a scenario seems not only natural but healthy, and the translator who does not doubt on the inside is likely to raise doubt on the outside, inviting the innocent question above to turn into its nasty alter-ego, not how do you dare, but how dare you?

That all of this can happen inside a translator's head should not be surprising. It can get pretty claustrophobic in there. And I suspect that the more languages you stuff inside, the more likely such confrontations become, with sets of grammars and conventions lining up against one another like battle ranks in a medieval allegory, only instead of Prudence clashing shields with Courage, it is phalanxes of helmeted articles, conjugations, and idioms that face off, and, from the outside at least, such battles are likely to take on a mock epic air.

It's not just a matter of the professor chuckling to himself behind the podium, however. Take, for instance, the interpreter in the room when Jesus talked to Pilate. Oh, I understand that most Biblical scholars assume they must have spoken together in some mutually intelligible language, but if they didn't—if, let's say, Pilate's Greek was rusty or Jesus's rudimentary, and they called upon that inscrutable third part known, in some circles, as an *interpreter*—

would anyone remember the fact of his presence, let alone his participation? *And lo Interpretus did say unto Pontius Pilate...* It somehow lacks that authoritative ring and raises, well, doubt.

Imagine, moreover, the deep doubt likely in such a scene. Let's see, thinketh Interpretus, what in the world could the accused be trying to say?

"Steward of another realm?"

"King of another community?"

"Chieftain of the dominion of the spirit?" That sounds awful! But "not of this world" isn't bad, even if the meaning is murky. Interpretus doth wonder about the word "polis" as a possibility—the city as the world, the world as the city, the world city or *cosmopolis*, as in the teachings of Chrysippos, and maybe this is what the accused means. Perhaps he has traveled in those parts and understands these teachings—but there isn't time to think it all through.

Interpretus' legs begin to tremble as the guards take the prisoner away and he wonders whether he has said the wrong thing, offered up the wrong solution. He listened, tried to understand, and made his choice. Oh, if only he could explain! These words he had chosen were *like* the foreign ones, but they were *not* the foreign ones. Neither Praetor nor anyone else understood that he was not providing an equivalent; he was painting a new picture with paints whose timbres the source language might or might not have. And what if he didn't understand correctly? What if there was a timbre in the source that he had never heard before? Something from the accused's childhood, or village life in a village he'd never been to, or a mumbled prefix like pseudo- or demi- or quasi-, or a suffix swallowed altogether that made a positive into a negative or a negative into a positive? What if he had extrapolated too much based on his own paltry understanding of such things and the world? Interpretus is no expert, not in this sort of conversation, or in anything really. He knows words. Imperfect yet precise. And powerful. What if the words he used were harmful in some way he could not know?

Fortunately, unlike our interpreter brethren, we translators generally have time, and the kind of dreadful doubt that might incapacitate Interpretus can be turned to positive ends. The special timbre of a word. The trilingually punning title. The insinuating tone. The regionalism. The textual variant. The

"The translator who does not doubt on the inside is likely to raise doubt on the outside."

dialogue marked as innocent or knowing or half-witted. The nuanced cultural reference. The 12-page footnote. The balanced sentence period. The rhymed, metered poem. Embedded in a poem. The palindrome. The fragment.

These and a million more of these become questions to be researched, problems to be explored, points of doubt. And provocations to the daring.

Russell Scott Valentino is a professor at Indiana University, where he is chair of the Slavic Languages & Literatures department. His translations include Sabit Madaliev's The Silence of the Sufi and Predrag Matvejevic's Between Exile and Asylum: An Eastern Epistolary. He received two NEA Translation Fellowships in 2002 and 2010.

The Sharable Rightness of Meaning

Esther Allen



Michael Henry Heim gave himself over entirely to the things that mattered to him. He worked among the intricate ambiguities of language and had not a dogmatic bone in his body, yet his life was the absolute refutation of Yeats' celebrated diagnosis of our time: "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Mike

was one of the best, and did what he did with total conviction. The fact that he brought his quiet intensity to bear on what is sometimes perceived as the minor field of translation may have seemed quixotic or even a waste of talent to some of his peers. Those who share his vocation know that Mike's unconditional, unflagging devotion to the art is one of the most valuable reaffirmations we have of its significance.

I first met Mike one February morning in 2003. He came to the offices of PEN American Center in New York City, introduced himself to everyone, and announced that he was donating \$734,000 to fund what was known during his lifetime as the PEN Translation Fund. The money came from a death benefit the U.S. Army had paid out for Mike's father, a Hungarian composer who enrolled and died during World War II, when Mike was a toddler. His mother had invested the money, and it grew over the years.

The one condition of the donation was that it be entirely anonymous: Mike simply couldn't bear to be associated with money. A man who prized tolerance, he was sometimes almost chagrined by his own aversion to wealth, power, and celebrity.

He had no ambition to vault up hierarchies, no notion of vaunting his own achievements, and little stomach for hearing them extolled by others. In 2009, PEN American Center members (who only learned Mike was the donor of the Translation Fund after his death in 2012) voted to award him the PEN/ Ralph Manheim Medal for Translation, a lifetime achievement award. Mike was too busy with his students at

My Recommendations

***Hopscotch* by Julio Cortázar, translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa.**

I read this book while on my junior year abroad in Paris, before I was capable of reading Cortázar in Spanish. It's one of the big points of departure in my life: it made me see Paris and French in a new way, and made me want to know Spanish.

***The Book of Blam* by Aleksandar Tišma, translated from the Serbo-Croatian by Michael Henry Heim.**

I read this book, set in Novi Sad in 1942, after the 1999 NATO bombing and just before I met Michael Henry Heim for the first time, so it seems remarkably prophetic to me on a number of levels.

***The Tale of the 1002nd Night* by Joseph Roth, translated from the German by Michael Hoffman.**

This was my gateway into the work of Joseph Roth, the first of many, many books by him that I went on to read.

UCLA to attend the ceremony in person; instead he sent a warm tribute to Ralph Manheim, the award's long-deceased funder, who had inspired Mike decades earlier.

Languages offered an endlessly entangled global ecosystem of regeneration, decomposition, fertilization, transformation, and interanimation. Mike was a glutton for languages and no one seems quite sure precisely how many he mastered—was it more than a dozen? Eighteen? Words, their roots and stems evolving across regions and cultures in multitudinous forms, produced ever-transitioning and unforeseen meanings, and this was how the literary works he brought from language to language found new shape, new growth. He celebrated his 60th birthday by returning to the study of Chinese he'd begun as an undergraduate and by the time he died, just short of 70, he was translating a Chinese novel. Eight months before his death, he wrote me about another project: he was working with a Fulbright student from China on a translation into Chinese of his beloved friend Rosanna Warren's book, *Ghost in a Red Hat*. "The poems only get better," he wrote. "I see more and more, each time I read it."

Later, looking through Warren's book, I found this:

“I am willing to be rewritten, and let the printed poems of others be rewritten as well,
and let them steep in the bitter smell of eucalyptus, which is said to heal.”

I don't know how these lines work in Chinese; Mike did.

The year before Mike's death, Sean Cotter mentioned to me and Mike's former student Russell Valentino that Mike had published an autobiography. Typically, it happened by accident. In 1999, several huge fans of his work buttonholed Mike at a conference he helped organize in Timisoara, Romania, where Mike seems to have been a kind of rock star. In a mix of Romanian, Russian, French, and German, they bombarded him with questions about his life, then transcribed, translated, and

published his responses. The book, *Un Babel fericit*, was available only in Romanian. Sean offered to translate it, and the three of us decided to make it the core of a composite biography that will be published by Open Letter Press later this year. Mike was willing to be rewritten and pitched in on the project insofar as he was able. Predictably he devoted his attention to the prose cadences of Sean's translation and the new memories that going back over the interview brought to mind, with no thought whatsoever of establishing any sort of grand record of his life's work.

After Mike passed away, and as work on the book progressed, it became clear that we needed to include a complete bibliography of his literary output, to give readers some sense of the scope of what he did. I knew that the list of 20-odd titles on his UCLA web page was incomplete but had no idea how incomplete until I queried his department and searched through libraries and websites. In the end, the bibliography we assembled totals 60 books or plays, translated, co-edited, or co-authored between 1972 and 2012. To give you an idea, the year 2007 alone saw the publication of three books: memoirs by György Konrád (303 pages translated from Hungarian) and Günther Grass (403 pages, translated from German), and a novel by Terézia Mora (418 pages, translated from the German prose of a writer born and raised in Hungary). What's more, 31 of Mike's books remain in print; others

“It's the moment when you read something and find yourself enriched with understanding, connection, recognition, meaning.”

are coming back into print all the time.

These numbers would only have embarrassed Mike, who wouldn't have found much real significance in them. And impressive as it is, the bibliography is only one aspect of his contribution to our literary culture. The PEN Translation Fund has, to date, supported more than 100 translation projects; Mike was also a hard-working supporter of many other programs, including the American Council of Learned Societies' Social Science Translation Project and the National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowships. In a tribute written just after his death, Amy Stolls remembered how the NEA "approached Michael time and again to be a judge on the translation fellowships panel...to give us his opinion on certain applications.... [W]e sought his wise council on all matters of translation."

What Mike worked for, what he wanted, what brought him greatest pleasure and what he devoted his life to was pretty simple and infinitely complex. It's the moment when you read something—whether or not it's something Mike had anything to do with, regardless of what language it was written in, what language you're reading it in—and find yourself enriched with understanding, connection, recognition, meaning. He gave everything he had to that possibility.

Esther Allen has translated a number of works from French and Spanish and was made a Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres by the French government in 2006, in recognition of her work on behalf of translation. She received two NEA Translation Fellowships in 1995 and 2011.

III.

The Myth of the “Three Percent Problem” Chad W. Post



As the director of the Three Percent website—a blog and review site dedicated to promoting international literature and home to both the Translation Database and the Best Translated Book Award—one of the most frequent questions I’m asked is where the “three percent” figure came from.

If you’re not already familiar with this, three percent has been cited ad infinitum as representing the percentage of books in translation published on an annual basis in the United States. Or the United Kingdom. Or both. Probably both.

Just that statement—three percent of all books published in America are in translation—raises a plethora of questions: Has it always been three percent? Is this figure increasing? Which types of books make up this three percent—computer manuals or fiction? What are the names of these books? In an age of Big Data and approximately three million apps to help you “quantify your life,” this number reeks of fuzzy math. There is no single agency responsible for creating this number, and no office providing periodic updates. So where exactly did this figure come from, and how did it become so engrained in conversations about international literature?

The best attempt to explain where this number came from is Esther Allen’s essay “Translation, Globalization, and English” from *To Be Translated or Not to Be*. Rather than duplicate Allen’s efforts, I’ll just provide a quick recap of the two main sources for this now widely accepted figure: In 1999, the Literature office of the National Endowment for the Arts conducted an informal survey of 12,828 works of adult fiction and poetry published that year, and found 297 literary works in translation, which is just over two percent. And in 2005, Bowker (the organization responsible for assigning ISBNs to all books and tracking some bibliographic data) put out a news release claiming that translations accounted for 14,400 of the 375,000 books published in English worldwide in 2004. Which is just over three percent.

I suspect that one of the main reasons the three percent

statistic got so much traction with the general public is that it just *felt right*. Most reviews in major book review sections are of books from American and British authors. There are only a handful of stores in the country with “International Literature” sections. It’s hard for most people to name 25 contemporary writers who *don’t* write in English.

Equally important to the general conversation was the way in which this number was interpreted. The fact that only three percent of the books available to American readers are from other countries points to just how insular and isolated America has become. American writers have a hard time finding inspiration from that quirky, strange book from a “remote” part of the world.

Horace Engdahl, the secretary of the Swedish Academy (responsible for awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature), echoed these sentiments in 2008 when he stated that the U.S. was “too insular and ignorant to challenge Europe as the center of the literary world,” and, due in part to the paucity of translated works available, doesn’t really “participate in the big dialogue of literature.”

For these reasons—and others—the three percent figure became a sort of rallying cry for the myriad groups involved in the production

My Recommendations

***Hopscotch* by Julio Cortázar, translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa.**

This served as my gateway book to international literature as a whole. I read it the summer after graduating from college and promptly went on a Latin-American literature bender.

***Maidenhair* by Mikhail Shishkin, translated from the Russian by Marian Schwartz.**

I have to include at least one book I published, and of all the books I’ve worked on, this may well be the one that, a hundred years from now, will still be the source for dozens of theses. It’s a stunning book and Marian’s translation is epic.

***Life, a User’s Manual* by Georges Perec, translated from the French by David Bellos.**

Not only one of the best books ever written, but Bellos’ translation is nimble and inventive in all the best ways. The way he approached (and solved) the word play problems in this novel help me to believe that anything can be translated—given the right translator.

and promotion of international literature: translators, nonprofit presses, literary organizations, universities, weblogs, and magazines. The main belief was that this number was totally

“Bean counting doesn’t change lives—reading does.”

unacceptable and that something must be done. Many things. Universities started translation programs. New publishing houses came into existence. Literary festivals focused on international literature. Literary organizations worked to increase the audience for these

works. Books were written about the “Three Percent Problem.”

Fired up by this one statistic and what it means about the society we live in, a lot of people attempted a lot of different things to help diversify our culture. And, for the most part, they were very successful.

With all these various groups inspired to increase access to literature from other parts of the world, the figure *must* have moved a bit, right? Like up to five percent? Ten percent? At least four percent?

Unfortunately, that’s pretty unlikely, due mostly to how percentages work. According to the Three Percent Translation Database, the number of original translations of fiction and poetry published in the United States has increased from 360 in 2008 to 517 in 2013. In that same period, Bowker reports that the total number of books published has increased from over 289,000 to over 300,000. The number of translations being published is on the rise, as is the number of books being published overall.

My bigger concern—as someone who has helped popularize the idea of the “Three Percent Problem”—is whether or not this matters. Would the culture be a different place if we found out that five percent of books being published are in translation? I highly doubt it. Bean counting doesn’t change lives—reading does.

But it’s so much easier to talk about this three percent statistic and lament our insular ways. And so that’s what happens on panels and at conferences and in articles—everything boils down to this statistic and how wretched it is that publishers don’t publish more works in translation. Granted, I’d love if all my translator friends could buy summer homes based on how much work they’re getting, but even so, it’s worth pointing out that 517 works of translated fiction and poetry alone were published last year. Given the fact that the average American reads about four books a year, it will take them something like five lifetimes to read

all the translations from 2013.

Instead of hammering away at what we're missing, translators, panelists, publishers, journalists should be highlighting all the great stuff that we do have access to. There's so much great material—there are all the books coming out from *And Other Stories*, *Archipelago*, *Dalkey Archive*, *Europa Editions*, *New Directions*, *New York Review Books Classics*, *Open Letter Books*, and others. There are the international writers who “broke through”: Per Petterson, Muriel Barbery, Roberto Bolaño. For the past six years, the Best Translation Book Award fiction committee has put out a list of 25 great titles—each one worthy of being promoted and discussed.

I guess my greater point is that we don't live in 1994 anymore. All these works of international literature are available to all readers throughout the United States, and you can find out about them by visiting one of several dozen websites, or doing a simple web search. Focusing on the three percent statistic—or whatever it might *actually* be—reinforces the belief that it's *difficult* to find literature in translation, which is a blatant lie. There may not be 300,000 works of French noir coming out every year, but there are more books than any of us will read in a year, so let's quit fretting over a number and instead rejoice in all that has been made available to us.

Chad W. Post is the publisher of Open Letter Books and the Three Percent website, a resource of international literature, both of which have received support from the NEA. Post is also a faculty member at the University of Rochester in New York.

A Universe Of Layered Worlds

Olivia E. Sears



*"... he had a friendship with the vines
and the trees,
and he was like the eyelashes of the
forest."*

— Traditional, "The Geba Bohot
and Other Buru Tales,"
translated by Chaumont Devin, in
Two Lines: Tracks (2005)

Almost 20 years ago, the editors of *Two Lines*, our anthology of world writing, received a translation of tales from the island of Buru with an accompanying introduction. "The Buru people envision a universe of layered worlds, perhaps stacked one

upon another, or fitting inside one another like concentric shells," the translator wrote. In a typical Buru tale, hunters enter a cave in pursuit of prey and emerge suddenly into an open village where the animals they had been hunting were now men.

When I first read these story-poems, I recognized that they would be considered "exotic" — tales from Buru Island in the Central Moluccan Archipelago, transcribed in an ancient Austronesian language (in which they were sung) never before recorded until the bored teenage son of a missionary began collecting words and, eventually, stories.

Yet it was not their exoticism that I found striking; it was that many of the images resonated with me, a graduate student in Italian literature far across the world. When I read of a mythical Geba Bohot, or "wild man," described as "the eyelashes of the forest," I recalled Dada poet Tristan Tzara who wrote such lines as "the open road is a flower who walks with you" and described Dada as "a snow of butterflies coming out of a conjurer's skull." And when I read about the Buru concept of layered worlds I felt like I was wandering through a Jorge Luis Borges story or a José Saramago novel. (Of course, today the image of layered worlds just reminds us that scientists are discussing new evidence of cosmic inflation and, potentially, a multiverse.)

Like the hunter in the Buru tale, it seemed, this translation took me on an unexpected journey: I had entered a forest cave in Buru and emerged in the labyrinth of a Dada poem, following the threads left behind by the great storytellers of 20th-century world literature. To me that journey is the power of translation. I do not claim to have gained any deep understanding of the Buru people or their worldview, but that graceful image of the Geba Bohot was a gift that forged a connection for me across the seas. Reading such works—flashes of astonishing kinship followed by moments of disorientation—made our wide world (in its expanding multiverse) seem less vast and unknowable. And also far more complex.

Some argue that artistic expression in language is what makes us uniquely human; by extension, reading each other's words and thoughts, especially those from distant lands, is part of what binds us together across distances. But this sentiment alone cannot convey the power and importance of literary translation.

Many readers first gravitate towards literature in translation simply because they enjoy reading it. This pull goes beyond a passive pleasure; I believe reading literature in translation requires us to open

My Recommendations

Dante, Dante, and Dante

I recommend reading three different translations of Dante's *Inferno*—perfectly in keeping with the triadic spiraling of Dante's *terza rima* rhyme scheme. That may sound like a dusty recommendation, but Dante has been misconstrued in contemporary America. He was a radical poet, exiled for his political alliances, and very outspoken. The *Inferno* is a fascinating work of poetic mastery and philosophical complexity—but his scenes of horror are unmatched.

There are poetic translations, some attempting to replicate the rhyme and meter of the original *terza rima*, some transforming the poem into a more familiar form in English (Hollander, Pinsky, Mandelbaum). There are prose translations that aim to capture the details of the plot (Sinclair, Singleton). There are scholarly translations with extensive footnotes detailing the many political intrigues and religious disputes of the time, not to mention underlying philosophical notions and literary tropes, all of which are invaluable for students and researchers (Ciardi, and Sinclair again). Many translations attempt to recreate an archaic sound akin to Dante's Italian, but now there are also translations that aim to bring the poem squarely into 21st-century parlance, complete with references to *South Park* (Mary Jo Bang).

Abandon all hope of a single perfect translation, of course, but enter anyway, and rejoice in the many paths taken.

our minds, as much great art does, but even more so. A recent article published in the journal *Science* identified an increase in empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence among test subjects after they read literary fiction. To explain this effect, the researchers hypothesized that “literary fiction often leaves more to the imagination, encouraging readers to make inferences

“Reading literature in translation requires us to open our minds, as much great art does, but even more so.”

about characters and be sensitive to emotional nuance and complexity”; what, then, of the leaps of imagination required when confronting much less familiar characters and situations, and attempting to perceive their cultural and linguistic

context, further extending the empathic stretch? Whether the empathy effect of foreign fiction is greater or not, its translators inherently multiply the opportunities for reading literary fiction by unceasingly contributing to the array of works available to read in English. For decades, classics in translation like *Anna Karenina* and *The Stranger* have been included on many a high school English class syllabus, not to mention *The Iliad* and The Bible. Now graduates can find South Asian and Egyptian and Vietnamese masterpieces on the shelves as well.

The Center for the Art of Translation is committed to bringing these voices into English, often for the first time, through the now biannual *Two Lines* journal of world writing and through our newly launched Two Lines Press. Our interest goes beyond publishing, however, to the various ways in which translation can touch society, as an art form, as an education tool, and through community events. As communities in the U.S. become more diverse, it is no longer just the borders where we need metaphorical bridges; more and more these gaps need to be spanned within our own neighborhoods. Ironically, we have found that translation allows us to know each other better, and therefore feel more connected to one another, here at home.

In our Poetry Inside Out (PIO) education program, which takes place in the often linguistically diverse classrooms of our public schools, we teach students to translate great poems from their original languages into English, and the poems we select reflect the participants’ cultural and linguistic heritage. In San Francisco, where there is a robust Japanese-American community, students might begin by translating one of Matsuo

Bashō's masterful haikus. Once the translation is complete, the students all share, defend, and debate word choices and thought processes. The program encourages the students to value exchange and collaboration: in the words of one PIO student, "Everyone had their own interpretation. They all thought differently... it made other people think... how could I improve [my translation]?"

In the complex multi-ethnic and multilingual communities of so many American classrooms, there are also societal benefits to teaching translation. Teaching poetry in its original language and guiding kids to bring the poem into English together, in dialogue, offers an opportunity to value the diversity of languages and literatures. Students who speak another language at home see that different languages can all be viewed as equally valuable, beautiful, powerful, and capable of producing great art—art so highly valued, in fact, that we want to share it beyond its home or original language. One student writes, "It's like... imagining yourself in a different world."

Even if there were no assessments of students, no studies of fiction readers, no proof of the value of the arts for individuals and communities, we would still publish and teach and have conversations about literature. Because we believe in human expression through language, implicitly—we believe in stories without demonstrable benefits; in poems without quantifiable value; in reading for the immeasurable pleasure of words and ideas. We believe in sharing literature from everywhere. We believe in expanding the contours of our body of reading simply for the delight of having more books and more variety. We believe in teaching people how to read—to really read, as a translator does, absorbing a poem into her marrow and feeling every single word pulse through her bloodstream. We believe in teaching people how to write and translate, with mentors like Garcia Lorca and Dante and Sappho to guide us, offering just enough firm ground and elevation to allow the wings to unfold and launch us into the blue, far above the eyelashes of the forest into worlds layered over even more extraordinary worlds.

Olivia E. Sears is the president and founder of the San Francisco-based Center for the Art of Translation, which broadens understanding about international literature and translation. The center has been a frequent NEA grantee. Sears was the translation editor for the NEA anthology Best of Contemporary Mexican Fiction and has served on NEA translation panels.

Recovering the Culture

Nicolás Kanellos



First off, let's establish that Latinos in the United States communicate in two languages. This has been the case since the 19th-century expansion of the United States into lands formerly owned by Spanish-speaking peoples, and because the U.S. achieved economic and often political domination of lands to the South, which resulted in directing their migrant streams northward. As the major publisher of Latino

literature, Arte Público Press of the University of Houston not only reflects this bilingual/bicultural reality, but also helps it to flourish by publishing works in the original language of composition, be that Spanish or English or a blending of both. On the latter, while literary texts have mixed both languages since the late 19th century, it has only been since the 1960s that Latino writers have adapted what linguists call code-switching (and popularly but inappropriately called "Spanglish"), that is, the free-wheeling switching from one language to another in common everyday discourse in Latino communities. Avant-garde authors explore this bilingualism as not only a means of remaining faithful and accessible to working-class communities but also as a means of esthetic experimentation, creating a meta-language or new meaning in the interstices and between the junctures of Spanish-English discourse—no translation permitted here!

One of Arte Público's main audiences include high school and university classes that are often made up of bilingual readers. However, we are not beyond reaching broader English-language markets with bestsellers. For general readers as well as those in school, we publish separate works in the original English or original Spanish. Because there is a dearth of bookstores in Hispanic communities—very few distributors and wholesalers and even fewer reviewers of books published in Spanish—we are forced to publish fewer Spanish-language books for our adult market, despite some 40

percent of our submissions being written in the language of Cervantes. We'd just take a large financial loss to do so because connecting with the ideal Spanish-language reader is currently so difficult. Thus to reach a broader audience we either publish an English-language translation to accompany the Spanish original between the same covers, that is a bilingual edition; or we publish a separate English-language translation in order for the book to get reviewed and noticed before we publish the original Spanish edition. This goes completely contrary to the norm in commercial publishing, which issues simultaneous editions of a few renowned Latin-American authors—but up until recently, the large presses were not even issuing Spanish-language editions. In most cases, we commission translations to professionals with whom the authors have a good relationship, and then our in-house editors, who represent a variety of national Spanish-language dialects, edit the translations.

In our program to recover the written culture of Latinos in the United States, from the 1600s up to 1960, we maintain a vigorous English translation program for our anthologies and separate book editions. The purpose

My Recommendations

***Dante's Ballad* by Eduardo González Viaña, translated from the Spanish by Susan Giersbach-Rascón.**

A poetic and myth-based novel heavily influenced by popular music in Spanish and rendered beautifully by Rascón, who has managed to produce credible renditions of popular songs.

***The Valley* by Rolando Hinojosa, translated from the Spanish by the author.**

Hinojosa is probably the most fluently bilingual author writing in the United States. He is able to take local dialects of South Texas and recreate them in his English originals and vice versa.

***Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, translated from the English into Spanish by Rosario Sanmiguel.**

The novel set on the El Paso-Juarez border is expertly translated by Sanmiguel, a novelist and lifelong resident of the area and familiar with the dialects and culture of the border.

of the program is to make accessible to the general reader and to the education system important works of this “American” literature that dates back to even before the American Republic was founded. This program is doubly difficult because not only must the translators be literary translators, but they must also be experts in historical lexicon, rhetoric, style, and even such arcane

“Not only must the translators be literary translators, but they must also be experts in historical lexicon, rhetoric, style, and even such arcane disciplines as paleography.”

disciplines as paleography. For example, our *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage* series has issued a new translation of one of the earliest works of “American” literature, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s 16th-century *The Account*. And no one would believe that one of the masterpieces of hemispheric literature, José Martí’s *Simple Verses*, had never wholly been translated before our project came along. Locked in archives are Spanish-

language newspapers and magazines and short-run editions from small publishers with literally tens of thousands of Spanish works created on American soil but heretofore inaccessible to American readers until our project effected its archaeological and translation work.

Our greatest reach as a press, nevertheless, is through our children’s and young adult publishing, which places bilingual books in the hands of hundreds of thousands of students and families. Our Piñata Books imprint is what we may consider closest to the grassroots, closest to the language and culture of Latino communities as they exist today. Piñata’s mission is to present the social situations, language, and culture of Latino children as they exist within the United States, thus allowing children to see themselves depicted in books and read the language they are most comfortable with. They also serve as bridges between the school and the home culture, where parents may read to their children in the language of the home. It is in our bilingual picture books that we translate from English to Spanish and vice versa, depending on the language of the original text, and we place the original text and its translation on the same page. We edit and perfect the original text, then hire translators or work with our in-house translators to either

preserve the ethno-dialect of Spanish important to the story or adjust the original Spanish so that the lexicon is intelligible to all Latino ethnicities. The reason for this apparently contradictory practice is to meet the needs with some books of a general Spanish-language reader, and with others to faithfully portray the local culture when it is important to the story. Our children's bilingual picture books are purchased nationwide by schools and their suppliers for bilingual, dual language, and ESL classes, and for migrant education and literacy programs. We have also provided free-of-charge hundreds of thousands of bilingual picture books dealing with health topics—these are distributed in neighborhoods across the country by community health workers (*promotores*) and county clinics.

As part of Piñata we also publish books for middle readers, again with the same ethos, but in a different format. They are more text-heavy, divided into various chapters and feature the complete text in one language, followed by the translation in the other—except that the translation is upside down in these “flip books” rather than on the same page or face-to-face.

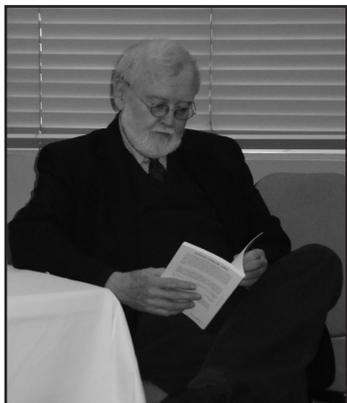
By the time Latino students have reached high school, and the education system has worked its acculturation magic, most of them read English very well, and thus our young adult books are published primarily in English originals. On occasion we address the immigrant high school population with a Spanish-language original—of course, preceded by a separate English-language translation that has had the benefit of being reviewed by librarians and educators.

As you can see, the diversity of translation options is not only dictated by market conditions but also by the social and educational function that the texts must serve. Although seemingly complicated to an outside observer, our practices are culturally and linguistically based; moreover, despite our books' cultural specificity, they have won numerous awards from the world at large as well as from Latino critics and judges.

Nicolás Kanellos is the director of Arte Público Press (a recipient of NEA grants) of the University of Houston, where he has been a professor since 1980. He has published numerous books on Hispanic literature and theater.

The Value of Publishing Translation

John O'Brien



In 2001, Dalkey Archive was excelling at re-issuing out-of-print literature that had previously appeared from another publishing house for many years, but was not, I thought, excelling in finding new writers. I had wanted to find writers who had never been published in English, either young or old, whose quality was unquestioned but had not done well in the marketplace—writers whose sole

merit was their artistic excellence.

But how to find out about these writers? Up until that time, only France had sponsored an editorial trip for Dalkey and helped to arrange meetings with publishers and critics. Would, however, other countries help in the same way? Largely as a test case, we contacted the Finnish office responsible for promoting its literature abroad, the Finnish Literature Exchange.

Iris Schwank, the head of this government agency, was quite welcoming to the idea and sponsored a trip to Helsinki in March 2004 for myself and an assistant editor to meet with the major publishing houses and a few critics, an editor of a literary magazine, a handful of authors, and the manager of the largest bookstore in Helsinki.

I think the publishers had a very hard time believing that an American publisher had shown up at all, never mind that he was looking for the best of their literature rather than what would sell well. The trip to the bookstore led me to a small display of translated Finnish literature, and there were a few gems sitting there. This trip led to Dalkey eventually publishing three Finnish books.

“The National Endowment for the Arts was the only funding agency that would help with the costs of publishing literature—foreign or domestic.”

Trips followed to Estonia, the Netherlands, Flemish-speaking Belgium, Norway, Spain, Romania, and many others. Some trips were better organized than others, but all except one resulted in Dalkey taking on more books. Aside from the practical results of these often-exhausting trips, with meetings from breakfast through late dinners, was the realization of how important it was for these countries to get their books published in English. This realization was accompanied by the comparison to my own country, which at the time provided no help to other countries to discover American literature nor to American publishers to discover the rest of the world. The National Endowment for the Arts was the only funding agency that would help with the costs of publishing literature—foreign or domestic—support that, coupled with grants from the foreign countries, allowed Dalkey Archive to publish the books.

Both surprised and pleased with the willingness of other countries to help finance such publications, it wasn't until much later I began to wonder *why* they did this—why was being published in English so important? One superficial reason was that publication in English, especially in America, was a mark of approval for the

My Recommendations

These are the translations I was so enthused about that I published them.

***Chinese Letter* by Svetislav Basara, translated from the Serbian by Ana Lucic.**

A very funny and dark novel by a Serbian writer about a man who hears a knock on the door one day, and a few men tell him that he must write a statement but do not tell him about what. They will be back to pick it up, seeming to suggest that there will be severe consequences if the statement isn't ready and in proper form.

***Vain Art of the Fugue* by Dumitru Tsepeneag, translated from the Romanian by Patrick Camiller.**

Incredibly funny, ingenious novel about a man who, day after day, boards a tram in order to get to the train station where he is to meet the woman he loves. Each day is a failure, but for different reasons. The fugue-like structure allows this Romanian author to take the book in any direction he chooses. First time translated into English.

***Night* by Vedrana Rudan, translated from the Croatian by Celia Hawkesworth.**

An angry, obsessed woman sits watching television all night and rants about her life and the people who are causing her problems, especially every male she knows, including her husband. A very funny novel whose extremes baffled reviewers because it did not fit into preconceptions of what women can or should write about. This is the first appearance of this Croatian author into English.

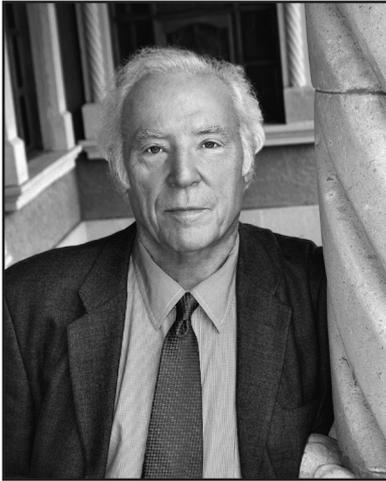
writer. It was also ironic, given that translations were looked at skeptically by the media and bookstores in the United States.

But later, I became aware that there were other reasons: that being published in English brought the books to the attention of publishers around the world (because English had become the lingua franca and could now be read in their entirety), and that an American publisher thought the books had commercial value. And how could such a capitalistic publishing house not be right?

John O'Brien is the founder of Dalkey Archive Press, a frequent NEA grantee, which he began in 1984 while a professor teaching American and British literature. The Press now has more than 750 books in print, over half of which are translations.

Toward an Understanding of Translation

Rainer Schulte



To understand translation in an immediately accessible form, we might start with George Steiner's statement from his study of translation *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*: "All acts of communication are acts of translation." In an extended sense, we can say that we are all constantly engaged in some form of a translation process. Our speech, our perceptions, our ideas, our facial expressions, our movements, and our

interpretations are all products of a complex translation dynamic. There is hardly any daily activity that does not involve some form of translation.

We must consider verbal, visual, and musical interpretations as acts of translation. In communication with other people, we translate sound and physical gestures to understand the full content of a conversation. The actor translates the spoken word into the performance on the stage as sound, gesture, and movement. The pianist translates the notes of the score to the piano, and the conductor translates the spirit of an orchestral score for the musicians, who in turn give life to the notes they read in the scores. The same can be said about writers, composers, and visual and multimedia artists, who translate their visions into the possibilities of their respective medium; not to mention the translation that takes place from one medium to the next: novels into film, musical sounds into visual images, and images into musical sounds. It would be difficult to find human activities that are not in one form or another involved in the act of translation.

The inherent power of translation lies in its ability to build bridges between here and there. As we, as translators, cross the bridge from one language to the other, our thought process undergoes an intriguing change; we leave some of our prejudices and preconceived notions behind us, and we begin

My Recommendations

Love in the Time of Cholera
by Gabriel García Márquez,
translated from the Spanish by
Edith Grossman.

Grossman succeeded in recreating the refined levels of humor in her translation of the novel. A certain musical air carries the translation from the beginning to the end.

The Tin Drum by Günter Grass,
translated from the German by
Breon Mitchell.

This translation is a marvelous example of how a translator was able to reproduce the delicate vibrations of the details hidden in each corner of the novel. Mitchell's afterword to his translation is one of the most insightful reproductions of the translation process that I have ever read.

Chronicles of Hell by Michel de Ghelderode, translated from the French by George Hauger.

Translating plays requires a good ear to recreate the range of different voices. Hauger has succeeded in sculpting the different energetic outbursts of the characters. His translation has largely contributed to the success of this play in the English-speaking world.

to think ourselves into the situation on the other side of the bridge. A willingness to embrace the other accompanies the walk across the bridge, and the translators undergo a transformation. They no longer insist that their way of looking at their own world is the only one. They adopt a sense of openness toward the situations at the end of the bridge. Translation becomes an encounter with the other, not a confrontation. Translators undertake a strange voyage; there is no final arrival point. They never stop crossing the bridge, since they constantly link one moment to the other, one word to the other, one thought to the other, and one image to the other. Translators never come to rest; they are constantly in two places at the same time by building associations that carry the foreign into the known of their own language.

And in that process, both the source-language text and the receptor-language text undergo a transformation. Translation is neither the source language nor the receptor language, but the transformation that takes place in between. That constant being at two places at the same time develops what I refer to as associative thinking. In other words, the translator is always engaged in a never-ending dialogue with the work under

consideration to be rendered from one language into another.

In a deeper philosophical sense, translation deals with the challenge of carrying complex moments across language and cultural borders, and, therefore, translators always navigate in realms of uncertainty. Words are very fragile, and no word can ever fully express the nature of a situation or an emotion.

Furthermore, as soon as a word enters into contact with another word, certain new associations of meaning are created that transcend the original definition of a word. Therefore, each translation is the making of yet another meaning that comes to take shape through the interpretive approach and insight of the

“Translators never come to rest; they are constantly in two places at the same time by building associations that carry the foreign into the known of their own language.”

translator. The premise of all translations remains the same. Each translation is the variation of yet another translation, which excludes the notion of ever arriving at the only definitive translation. The dialogue with the text continues with each reading and, therefore, with each attempt at a translation. The translator is continuously engaged in finding correspondences to words, images, and metaphors in the new language. Ultimately, translation lives on the attempt to produce analogous correspondences and not identical ones.

Very few people have an idea of what goes into the making of a translation. The practice that should be promoted is for translators to reflect on how they built their translations from the very first draft to the final version. The reconstruction of the translation process would enhance our understanding of the craft and practice that ultimately produces a readable translation. With the appearance of electronic tools, translators cannot only show the various versions that they have prepared, but they can also include the thought processes that prompted them to make changes in word, image, and rhythm, and sound.

Another area of translation that has been drastically neglected or even frequently ignored is the reviewing of translation. At this moment, there is no scholarly reference work or database that would inform a reader about the quality or non-quality of a published translation. In most cases, the reviews of

translations are written by critics or journalists who do not know the original language and therefore treat a translation as if it had originally been written in English. Actually, the most qualified reviewer of translations would be the translators, since they constantly stand with one foot in the source language and the other in the new language. They are familiar with the cultural and linguistic idiosyncrasies on both sides of the border.

And finally, the digital technology will open new vistas for the practice and study of translation. The thinking that drives translation is the constant creation of linkages between one and the other, the language here and the foreign language there. With the ascent of digital technology, not only can the movement of the translation process be recorded and fixed in some tangible form, but also the reader can move from a fixed position to a modifying interaction with the text. Translation as movement will be reconfirmed as a basic concept of translation, and the movement can be recorded through the digital technology for the first time in the history of translation studies. The digital universe will provide us with the opportunity to present the interpretation of texts—the most important activity that a translator has to pursue—in the most comprehensive way. In the environment of the digital, we can create objects that contain verbal, visual, musical, and sound components that bring the complexity of a work to life. The digital technology allows us to create a more total understanding of a work and, at the same time, the possibility of establishing a continuous interaction with the work.

Rainer Schulte is a professor at the University of Texas at Dallas and is a co-founder of the American Literary Translators Association, which has been supported by the NEA. He has translated poetry and fiction of writers from Latin America, Germany, and France.

Engaging the World

Susan Harris



When people talk about literature in translation, they often invoke the classics. Without translation, they note, most of us would not be able to read Chekhov, Flaubert, Homer; we would have no access to Goethe, to Dante, no knowledge of Norse mythology or the Arabian Nights. While indisputable, this argument can have the effect of compartmentalizing (if not marginalizing) translated literature as historical rather than artistic, encountered in a largely academic environment,

useful primarily for canonical purposes but not particularly relevant to contemporary life. But literature, with its crucial insight into world events from a human perspective, provides an incomparable link to culture from within, and is ever more valuable in establishing context and filling the lacunae in news reports. And in our largely monolingual country, where foreign-language fluency is the exception rather than the rule, that link, and that context, are accessible only through translation. The inability to read foreign languages, and the corresponding lack of access to literature written in anything but English, may be the ultimate “first-world problem,” one that reflects our insularity and isolation, and perpetuates our restricted knowledge of the rest of the world.

Everything we read is mediated at some point between source and delivery, and the greater the distance to the primary source, the greater the power those mediators have to shape and distort information. When that information is further compromised by outside perspectives, often perpetuating earlier misconceptions and generalizations, and when both language and geographical barriers preclude direct investigation, we can end up with simplistic abstractions that lead to lack of understanding, fear, and worse. To combat this situation, Words without Borders (WWB) works to promote cultural understanding through the translation, publication,

My Recommendations

Labyrinths by Jorge Luis Borges, translated from the Spanish by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby.

Your Face Tomorrow by Javier Marías, translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa.

Life, a User's Manual by Georges Perec, translated from the French by David Bellos.

and promotion of the finest contemporary international literature. Our publications and programs open doors for readers of English around the world to the multiplicity of viewpoints, richness of experience, and literary perspective on world events offered by writers in other languages.

WWB was conceived in 1999 by Alane Salierno Mason, a senior editor and vice-president at W. W. Norton. (One early and enthusiastic backer was the NEA's beloved former literature director Cliff Becker, who not only supplied enthusiastic support but gave us our name.) Alane was later joined by Samantha Schnee, former senior editor at *Zoetrope*, and Dedi Felman, then an editor at Oxford. Alane originally envisioned a resource for editors and others in publishing who were interested in international literature but unable to read it in the original. WWB has evolved into a primary online source for an international literary conversation, working to change the publishing landscape for literature in translation and to create a newfound appreciation for world writing among all readers of English.

We produce events and partner with book publishers to produce print anthologies, and in 2013 released our

own e-book celebrating the best work of our first ten years; but our most visible project is our online magazine. We publish monthly; every issue has a theme—a topic, a country or region, or a language—and includes other features, book reviews, and interviews. To date we've published more than 1,800 poems, short stories, novel excerpts, and essays, by writers from 128 countries, translated from 102 languages. In addition to the issues, our blog, *Dispatches*, is updated several times a week with everything from breaking news to commentary on translated classics. Because we're free and online, we're accessible to anyone in the world with access to a computer. Many of our readers are in the U.S., but two-thirds are overseas.

“This is the power and importance of literature in translation: When other poetic traditions are made accessible to us, they can only enrich our own.”

Although we're not an explicitly political publication, we've often addressed current world events through literature. In the wake of the heady Arab Spring of 2011, as the rebellion spread east and the dominos started falling, we published a double issue of writing from 14 of the countries involved. Few of the pieces were actually written in response to the events, but all provided context for the English-language audience to understand what prompted the uprisings. We've published fiction reflecting the trauma for both societies of the Iran-Iraq War, a conflict as central to their literatures as World War I is for the U.S. and Europe. Our issue on the Mexican drug wars reveals the living hell of daily life under the cartels; our Venezuela issue, published just as that country erupted in protests, provided essential intelligence on that often-overlooked nation. On a lighter note, our Apocalypse issue, pegged to the 2012 doomsday prophecy (but scheduled for January rather than the projected December, just in case), presented a number of amusing scenarios from around the world.

We publish an occasional series called *The World through the Eyes of Writers*. It's based on the first WWB anthology, *Words without Borders: The World through the Eyes of Writers*, in which established international authors recommend the work of younger or emerging writers, and we commission and publish the translation.

When invited to participate, the great Syrian-Lebanese poet Adonis suggested an Egyptian poet, Abdel-Moneim Ramadan, who had not been published in English. Ramadan's dazzling submission, "Funeral for Walt Whitman," evokes Adonis's famous "Funeral for New York" (itself in dialogue with Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York*) and its appeal to Whitman in the face of the decline of the city; but the younger poet extends the connection, placing Whitman in direct conversation with Lorca, any number of classical Arabic figures, and a clutch of early modernist and contemporary Iraqi poets. Steeped in multiple poetic traditions, "Funeral for Walt Whitman" links poets across languages and generations, and demonstrates the crucial role that translation plays in the development of international literary culture: We can read the poem because it's been translated into English, but Ramadan could write the poem because Lorca and Whitman have been translated into Arabic.

So: a Syrian-Lebanese poet who writes in both Arabic and French recommends an Egyptian poet, who draws on classical Arabic figures as well as modern Iraqi writers, alludes to a Spanish master, foregrounds an American giant, and blends them all in a work both densely allusive and thrillingly original. That poem becomes part of the literary and cultural landscape, poised to inspire and provoke further connections and understanding. In its synthesis of multiple poetic traditions, its drawing on the past to create something singular in the present, Ramadan's poem embodies the notion that literary culture evolves over time, that each generation both extends and expands its literary traditions, and that cross-fertilization of languages, traditions, and writing enhances and benefits all sides. And the English translation in turn brings this fresh juxtaposition to readers who will discover not only Ramadan, but the writers and works that inform his work.

This is the power and importance of literature in translation: When other poetic traditions are made accessible to us, they can only enrich our own. And when other cultures, other countries—other *lives*—come to us through this most personal and revealing of forms, we can truly engage with and enrich each other, and become true citizens of the world.

Susan Harris is the editorial director of the Words without Borders website, which is supported by the NEA, and the co-editor, with Ilya Kaminsky, of The Ecco Book of International Poetry.

IV.

Brokers of Babel

Edward Gauvin



A curious thing about being an American abroad is that everyone knows more about my country than I do and can't wait to tell me all about it. Being a translator is a bit like that. Everyone has an opinion about my profession, which is usually that it's simple or impossible.

Simple, because surely it's a matter of holding up words to the mirror of a bilingual dictionary. This is the matter-of-fact verdict of those for whom a foreign

tongue should not, perhaps must not, pose an obstacle to getting through the day—and quite rightly so. However clunky, cluttered, approximate, rife with the wrong prepositions and the comedy of idiom, language is indulged, so long as we can see the message for the thicket of mistakes. This sort of thinking—always good for a guffaw at an international potluck—also underlies the dream of machine translation.

If we might qualify this workaday opinion as popular, then the second view—impossibility—is a more refined affair, for loss is always an acquired paradigm. Crimes of this order are subtler, offenses not to syntax but to taste. One must be taught to lament the sonorities of a Romance language brutalized by abduction into one more Germanic. As ever, a little learning is a dangerous thing. Then again, when Freud listed his three impossible tasks, teaching made the cut. The others were to govern and to cure. Happily, translation was nowhere to be found. What these two outlooks limn, really, is the old divide between the instrumental and expressive properties of language.

Are we to conclude, then, that translation is “difficult, but possible,” like peace in the Middle East? Divergent legal readings of the definite article have scuttled peace treaties—as, famously, after the Six-Day War, though one might say the parties there were looking for an excuse. And that is the thing about reading, as with so many other human endeavors: what we look for, we find. A translation is a single reader's record of those findings, ratified by editors or friends. An expert reader, one would hope: devoted,

close, sympathetic, fallible but also inimitable.

Yet when Wimsatt and Beardsley, articulating their famous Intentional Fallacy, first claimed the “poem belongs to the public;” when, 20 years later, Roland Barthes declared the author dead, a new kind of reader was born, un beholden to authorial intent. But the emancipation was rather selective. A certain segment of the public was left out. Even now, when interpretive freedom is a founding assumption, a certain kind of reader remains fettered. Wimsatt and Beardsley ended their essay with the portentous sentence: “Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle.” Translators, however, are still regularly looked to as mouthpieces for these otherwise extinct gods. To translate faithfully, one must descry the author’s intention. One must in fact possess a second sight that pierces mere words to meaning, looks past the saying to what’s said, in order to re-say it our way and not theirs. It should be noted that Barthes’ influential essay first appeared in English—that is to say, in translation, by Richard Howard—before being published in French a year later.

Discussions of fidelity bore me, because fidelity is so often drearily literal, to letter and spirit alike. Held faithful to

My Recommendations

***Barabbas* by Pär Lagerkvist, translated from the Swedish by Alan Blair.**

Nobel Laureate Lagerkvist’s Olympian distance lends his tale a surface simplicity—as tricky a tone to maintain in any language as it is to replicate in another—but underneath it is adamant, hewn from stone: a monumental meditation on human loneliness. Barabbas’ late encounter with Peter in prison always makes me tear up.

***Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald, translated from the German by Anthea Bell.**

One of the great authors of our age rendered by one of its great translators: lucid and dizzying. Bell is also a source of personal inspiration to me for her work on *Astérix and Obélix*.

***The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, translated from the French by Maria Jolas.**

This strange exception of a book, not central to Bachelard’s thought but always deeply felt, is now also one of his most popular. In its contemplation of domesticity’s mysteries, it is the perfect rainy day read.

the fundamentally unknowable, even immaterial ideal of intent, how can translation do anything but fail? The modern rhetorical move would be to reframe the question. The words are there on the page, but the author, like meaning, is something we create for ourselves. Intention, that beautiful thing, is in the eye of the

“Fidelity must be neither literal nor figurative, but dynamic—transfigurative.”

beholder. What might at first seem like abdication or evasion can in fact be renewal, since changing the basic terms opens fertile new fields for debate. Fidelity must be neither literal nor figurative, but dynamic—transfigurative.

Whether from page to screen, stage, song, or game—in short, between media—adaptation has,

if only grudgingly, often been given greater leeway than translation in recreating a work, while being similarly vilified for failures to honor the original. Movies, we sigh—ruining the book since 1902. Or used to. If these days adaptation commands greater leniency and esteem, the reasons are many: a cultural shift, some might say, in the definition of philistinism; a chastened deferral to the disseminative power of visual media; but more than any of these, I think, is an enhanced understanding of what moving a work across media entails—the cultural, commercial, and technological constraints that come with the territory and force change. DVDs with extras—director’s commentary, deleted scenes, making-of documentaries—put me in mind of nothing so much as critical editions of literature, with their essays and appreciations, contemporary to both classic text and modern reader. Whatever the consumer motivation for their inclusion (packaging filler to meet a price point, or endless special editions), DVD extras give us insight into the conditions of a work’s creation. Reviews from even a decade ago are a testament to the ways blame for a movie’s faults were wildly, often wrongly ascribed, due to misunderstandings of how movies are made. Greater transparency of process equals greater appreciation for the difficulty, necessity, or ingenuity of aesthetic choices. Greater public awareness of the sheer extent to which translators alter a text on a regular basis might obviate popular myths like the sanctity of punctuation or the audacity of substituting a synonym.

Disciplines, like new media, emerge to be disparaged, or understood only in terms of existing disciplines, before being

recognized for their unique and salient traits. It was decades before the photographer's handling of mechanical aspects (lighting, angle, lens, aperture, stock) was seen as aesthetic. As with media adaptation, where artistic energies are poured into impersonal franchises, the nature of translation is so hotly contested because what's at stake is: who gets to be called creative? And who gets to say so? The translator is always a literature lover, but also, it has lately come to light, a literature worker, and as such deserves respect, guarantees of safer working conditions, and certain basic rights for the formerly invisible and illicit.

Historians of translation will point out that the cult of fidelity is a rather more recent development. Translation was once a far messier affair, flecked with deliberate omissions, emendations, and bowdlerizations, in which translators—as gatekeepers of their culture, bloated with the chauvinism that entailed—sometimes took it upon themselves to assemble the originals they translated: *The Arabian Nights*, as Borges explored in his essay, or *Gilgamesh*, as translator Karen Emmerich discusses at *Words without Borders*. Now we bring works into our language for almost the opposite reason: to preserve intact their foreignness, as a challenge. To avoid appropriation, fidelity takes on new meaning as a political responsibility, a negotiation between two languages of unequal clout, in which the moral authority of the less powerful language must be asserted. If the people I meet abroad all have things to say about America, it is because America is a part of their lives in ways that their countries are, sadly, not a part of ours as Americans—something literature in translation endeavors to address and change.

Edward Gauvin has translated many fictional and graphic works and is the contributing editor for graphic fiction at Words without Borders. He received an NEA Translation Fellowship in 2011.

A More Complex Occasion

Pierre Joris



In high school, in Luxembourg where I lived until I was 18, I heard a reading of Paul Celan's most famous poem, "*Todesfuge* / Death Fugue." It may have been the one absolute epiphany I experienced. It was not the gorgeously

of the verbal music and of the poem's elegant fugal construction, nor was it the obvious horror of the content, the exterminated bodies of the Jews going up in smoke to be buried in the air that created this effect. No, it was the abyss opened by the seemingly impossible and discrepant combination of those two contradictory elements into which I fell—making me realize that there was a use of language different from all other ones, be that daily speech or novelistic storytelling. And that other use of language was poetry.

I never recovered from this discovery and some five years later—years during which I had written my juvenile poems and stories in French and in German—when I decided to write poetry in English and make that my life's work, I also realized that translation would have to be an essential part of the work. Not only because I foolishly thought at the time that literary translation could be a way of making a living as a poet, but also because I saw translation as both a duty and a core poetic learning experience. A duty, because I had the languages and therefore felt it to be my ethical responsibility to help ferry things from one language to an other so that the language-challenged could get some sense of what was being thought and written and felt elsewhere in the world. A core learning experience, because I never believed one could learn to write poetry in creative writing classes, nor do I believe in the old romantic notions of genius or muse or inspiration, but I do think—no, I know—that reading is essential to writing.

The closest reading—total immersion, in fact—into the strongest and most mysterious and challenging work you can encounter (and the very act of going to encounter it), is finally

the only way to learn about writing. What is the closest reading you can give a poem? Translation, of course. Translation made me discover not only the depth of the poem and the difficulties of the original language but also the complexities, difficulties, limits, and resources of the so-called “target” language, the one you translate into. For a young poet translation can thus be an incredible learning experience in terms of poetics: how does the great poet I am translating do the job—how does she put the words of her poem together—and thus, what can I learn from this act?

The first thing one learns from such attention is something about the constructedness of a poem, something that Stéphane Mallarmé and William Carlos Williams insisted on, namely that a poem is a machine made of words, and that when using a different set of construction elements—words in a different language—we are likely to get a different object. And if we kick that realization up one level of abstraction, we realize that there is no “natural” language, that no words fit the things in the world perfectly, that no language adheres to the world unambiguously, without remainder, that between word and world there is always slippage—enough slippage to make thousands of languages

My Recommendations

***The Odyssey* by Homer, translated from the Ancient Greek by Charles Stein.**

Finally a translation (semantically accurate and orally—it was an oral epic, after all!—exciting) that arises from a very acute and accurate sense of contemporary American poetics and not from an academic estimation of what Homer may have or should have sounded like.

***The Complete Poetry* by César Vallejo, translated from the Spanish by Clayton Eshleman.**

Eshleman has consistently been our best Vallejo translator, the only one to have spent a lifetime working and reworking maybe the most complex oeuvre of 20th-century Latin-American poetry.

***A Passenger from the West* by Nabile Farès, translated from the French by Peter Thompson.**

Full disclosure: I was asked to write the introduction to this book by the great Algerian novelist/poet, which I did with great pleasure given the excellence and intelligence of the work and the translation.

able to speak with completely different sounds of roughly the same thing. Or is it ever “the same thing” when said in a different language? “*Pain*” and “*Brot*,” as has often been pointed out, are very different things and may have little or nothing to do with what is called “bread” in this country. And that’s when you

“Translation made me discover not only the depth of the poem and the difficulties of the original language but also the complexities, difficulties, limits, and resources of the so-called ‘target’ language, the one you translate into.”

realize that all languages are foreign languages, even one’s mother tongue.

Now, this is generally true, but let me be a bit more personal. I speak (and write) with forked tongue—not thinking here so much of the snake’s basic bifurc’d organ, but more of the dinner fork’s quadruple prongs. I translate into English and into French (from half a dozen languages), and write—at least all the poetry I write—in English, my fourth tongue. I was

thus able to learn from the U.S. poets I translated into French (my third language), while simultaneously learning my writing language (my fourth language) by translating “foreign” poets into English. Though of course, at this level of confusion, the notion of what is foreign to me is very familiar, or to transpose Charles Olson quoting Heraclitus, I am quite familiar with what is most estranged from me.

One further observation: what many years of practicing (and thinking about) poetry and translation have led me to is a sense that the often-stated difference in nature between the supposedly pure and unalterable “original” poem and an always secondary impure “translation” is much exaggerated. This leads me to redefine what a poem is by agreeing with poet/translator Léon Robel’s that “a text is the ensemble of all its significantly differing translations.” A poem is thus a variable thing: the poet’s hand-written poem is not the “same” poem when first published in a magazine, which in turn is ever slightly different when republished in a volume, then a selected collection, and later in a posthumous collected volume. The poet’s public readings of the poem, its being set to music by a composer, its

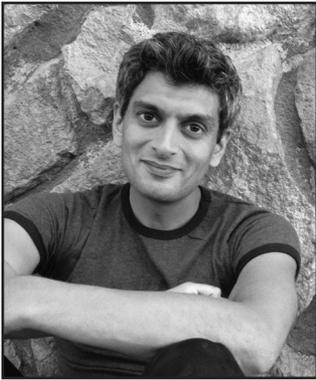
translation into one or ten or however many languages—all these events do change the poem, enriching it, making it into a more complex occasion.

Such a definition of the poem also does away with the old romantic idea of the untranslatability of poetry, an idea stuck in an idealist conception of the “oeuvre,” of the work of literature, but also of the individual and the world, and of the incommunicability of consciousness. If we acknowledge the poem to be such a mutable complex of occasions, then nothing is more translatable, nothing demands multiple translations more than a poem—and nothing enriches the poem more than being translated. This idea of instability, of relativity, of oscillating meanings and objects also brings the act of writing-as-translating and translating-as-writing into the various modern paradigms of knowledge. Think back to one of the emblematic poems of American Modernism: the opening poem of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*. This magnificent poem is simultaneously a translation (forward into English but also backward into a form derived from Anglo-Saxon poetics) of a translation of a translation (Pound’s Englishing via Andreas Divus’ renaissance Latin version of a scene from Homer’s *Odyssey*) and an homage to the translator. Poet and translator, *même combat!*

Pierre Joris has published more than 40 books of poetry, essays, and translations, including several translations of the poet Paul Celan, and received two NEA Translation Fellowships in 1999 and 2012.

Carrying Words through Time

Kazim Ali



I translated Ananda Devi because I wanted to *write* those poems. So sometimes it is a jealous trick. I chose her book *quand la nuit consent a me parler* because it was small and its cover was hot pink with yellow lettering. But as I read the poems I knew I could never have written poems so raw, so honest, so *angry*.

But I couldn't translate them in Paris where I found the book. It took my arrival in Pondicherry in franco-phone India to start to see the poems

as mine. And it took three more weeks and my arrival in Varkala, on the shore of the Arabian Sea, to feel the rhythm of Devi's ocean-borne Mauritianne poetics.

Poetry finds a place in the poem. Donald Revell argues that you can't find poetry in poems; it's likely true, but you *can* find poetry in translations, more than in writing poetry because in the translation you, the poet, are watching it happen.

It brings me to my most recent translation project, Sohrab Sepehri, an Iranian poet who wrote in Farsi, a language I neither speak nor read. When my father went to Iran for work I asked him to bring back to me volumes of contemporary Iranian poetry. I had grown up listening to the Arabic recitations of scripture and the Urdu poetry and mourning songs commonly recited during the month of Moharram—though one of my grandmothers was Iranian I was unfamiliar with the contemporary poetry of that place.

Among the books my father brought back were volumes by Sohrab Sepehri. They had been translated but the poetry of the lines felt stilted, formal, prosaic. I was taken with one line though: "I am a Muslim! The rose is my *qibla*!" The qibla is the direction of worship toward Mecca. Observant Muslims will turn in this direction wherever they are in the world. In hotels across the Muslim world and in South Asia this direction is marked by a large arrow painted on the ceiling. The fact that Sepehri was declaring not Mecca but a simple rose to be his qibla struck me to the core.

Since I could not read the Farsi myself, I worked with Jafar Mahallati, my colleague at Oberlin. He would read the lines and

then translate it on the spot for me. I would copy it down, assemble the poem, make notes, read my rendition back to him, he would stop me, elaborate, we would discuss, debate, argue. Eventually we would have a poem.

Sepehri in Persian is two things at once: very plainspoken, *prosaic* even, and then incredibly deeply philosophical and abstract. A poem about shopping for pomegranates turns into a poem about the impossibility of knowing the physical world at all. A poem about fish in a pond turns into a reflection on the element of water and then on the tragedy of the separation of human from the divine. No one thing is another in Sepehri's world yet these observations are tossed off in the most casual language. It *is* hard in English to keep up.

As we worked on "Water's Footfall," the poem from which the above line came, and then other Sepehri poems we found ways to render the language in a lyrical and musical way that matched the stark plainness of the original language. But I never could improve upon the bare declaration "The rose is my *qibla*" and so kept that phrasing in our rendition. How could we have translated that word "qibla" without diminishing its power in the explanation? We bet on the fact that with increased

My Recommendations

***Late into the Night: The Last Poems of Yannis Ritsos*, translated from the Greek by Martin McKinsey.**

***Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* by Mahmoud Darwish, translated from the Arabic by Jeffrey Sacks.**

There are, fortunately for Western readers, a broad range of translations of both of these very important world poets. Each spoke to the harrowing and tender human condition in a way that readers of more popularly known Neruda or Cavafy will much admire.

***State of Exile* by Cristina Peri Rossi, translated from the Spanish by Marilyn Buck.**

Peri Rossi is not widely translated but Buck here does a great service with a rendering of an early book that Peri Rossi wrote upon her flight from the military coup in Uruguay in 1972. When the coup ended Peri Rossi made a heartbreaking decision not to return: "I did not wish to trade one nostalgia for another."

relationships between cultures eventually the word would find its way into English and in future editions we would even unitalicize it. And anyhow, it's not a precise translation of the original Farsi

“The trick of translation is that the act of it transforms everyone: the original text, the new language, the author, and the translator all.”

line which reads “*Man musulman. Qiblam ek ghul sourgh*” or “I am a Muslim. My *qibla*, one single red rose.” We both found the sparer line closer in spirit to the bare daring of Sepehri’s sentiment than the closer translation, which seemed somehow too lush, too personal. Also, in English syntax the line would require that comma (or a colon) which graphically interrupts the declaration.

There is a space between humans and god, after all, which does not translate across languages. What could Sepehri have

meant? Translating means to carry words not just “across” languages and cultures, but often through time itself.

The trick of translation is that the act of it transforms everyone: the original text, the new language, the author, and the translator all. Sepehri and Marguerite Duras, whom I have also translated, affected my rhythm and diction in English.

When I completed the Sepehri translation I sent it to my friend Navid and his father, both of whom had read Sepehri in Farsi and loved him. Navid wrote back that both he and his father loved the translation but they worried about one single line, the poem’s most famous line, that is (of course) “*qiblam ek ghul sourgh*.” They felt that the line was meant by Sepehri as very tongue-in-cheek, a little sarcastic almost, that he was being ironic when he said, “I am Muslim,” that it was not an earnest declaration as I read it.

But there was something so true in me when I thought of him saying in full earnestness, “The rose is my *qibla*,” claiming that part of the natural world as a true direction of worship. He goes on in that same part of the poem to say the stream is his prayer rug, that his mosque is a meadow, that his Ka’aba (the great black cubical mosque in Mecca) is the wind in the trees.

In the end I took a chance.

Kazim Ali is a professor at Oberlin College and a poet, essayist, fiction writer, and translator. He also is the founding editor of the small press Nightboat Books. He has served on NEA grants panels.

The Art of Empathy

Johanna Warren



The translator-author relationship is a kind of psychic partnership, a mind-meld, a collaboration so intimate it requires one person to get inside another's brain. Sometimes when I'm translating, I get this amazing wobbly feeling that the boundaries of my identity have dissolved and expanded to encompass the author's experiences, which are often vastly different from my own. By the end of a book, I am bigger than I was when I started.

By far the most transformative instance of this was while translating the work of Claudia Hernández, whose short stories deal with growing up in the midst of El Salvador's civil war. Although I didn't realize it at the time, when I first read her work in college it was from across a wide canyon of cultural disconnect—I really liked it, but in retrospect my reasons were embarrassingly simplistic. The level of violence in her stories, and the desensitization to it that the narrative voice demonstrates, was at first so unrelatable that it struck me as kind of *funny*. To be sure, Hernández has a sharp wit and a sweet, playful sense of humor that shines through like stars in the blackness of her subject matter, but I'm talking about something else: I was missing the very real cultural context on which this fiction is based. This stuff was way too dark to be real, I assumed, having never seen a dead body in my 21 years of suburban life. It was so incongruous with my own experience that I processed it as entertainment. I'm pretty embarrassed to admit that, but I want to address it because I suspect other American readers may have a similar reaction to her work and this kind of content in general.

I grew up in a culture in which graphic depictions of torture and death are presented to us as entertainment, while the abundance of very real suffering in the world is kept behind a thick veil of smoke and mirrors. As a young person in that kind of bubble, it can be hard to process the fact that for a great many people, the bloody images we pay to see spattered across movie screens are in the street when you open your front door. Much of what I have learned from inhabiting the world of Claudia Hernández, corresponding with her and learning about her country's history has involved

My Recommendations

***If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, translated from the Ancient Greek by Anne Carson.**

I feel a sacred sisterly bond with Sappho, a fellow singer/songwriter from a distant time. The fact that only fragments of her work remain makes it even more appealing to me—they're like little clues on a treasure hunt. Anne Carson's translation has been a recurring source of inspiration for me in life and lyric writing.

***The Book of Monelle* by Marcel Schwob, translated from the French by Kit Schluger.**

This is an extremely graceful translation of an enigmatic and compelling work that weaves fractured fairy tales with nihilist philosophy.

The Bible.

Because it's a trip to consider how dramatically a few microscopic word choices have altered the course of history.

coming to terms with the fact that her stories are much closer to autobiography than fiction. I may wish I had never been so naïve as to miss the point as entirely as I did at first, but in reflecting on that I have no doubt that my whole being has expanded as a result of my evolving relationship with this work and its author, and for this I am grateful. To come to deeply empathize with a person you have never met, who was born into circumstances so different from your own, is the sweetest possible fruit of communication. That this can be the result of reading a book is a testament to the necessity of translation and the power of literature in general.

Forgive me if I'm getting too far out, but I believe in a broader sense this connective quality of translation is essential to the spiritual evolution of our species. Our stubborn fixation on the perception that *I* am separate from *you* and humans are separate from all other life on Earth has set us up for both individual misery and global catastrophe. Inflated and intoxicated as the ego is by this notion of separateness, it erects walls at every turn to keep "me" safe; even in death, we would rather rot in solitary boxes than return to the dirt. The work of the human soul at this time is to break down those walls, to rediscover the truth that everything in the universe is one and the same.

The most obvious means we have of accomplishing this work is communication. Inherently limited by our own experiences, we are like the blind men describing an elephant: each of us is right, but no one has the whole picture. By comparing notes, we help each other get closer to the truth—when you tell me what you feel and I tell you what I feel, we both expand our understanding of the unseeable whole.

But many things can impede communication, including, ironically, language. The verbal toolkit you inherit as a toddler enables you to effectively communicate within the culture you're born in to, but sets you apart from the rest of the world. Humans have a long and bloody track record of distrusting and devaluing what we do not understand, and conflating the capacity for verbal communication with sentience. Historically, this has been a favorite justification for denying moral standing to people from other cultures, people with disabilities, nonhuman species, and the earth itself—if they can't tell us they suffer, we don't believe that they do. In granting us the superpower of transcending the language barrier, at least, for now, among humans (fun fact: technology is currently being developed to facilitate two-way communication between humans and dolphins), translation reminds us that while the signifiers are infinitely variable, the signified is universal—whether you call it *dolor* or *Schmerz* or pain, it hurts! In biblical terms, every translated word works to reverse the confusion of tongues, allowing us to temporarily inhabit a long lost state of unity.

What translation can do for us, and what we so desperately need at this juncture in human history, is to radically increase our empathic capacities; to learn, or perhaps relearn, how to listen—to people of all linguistic traditions and hopefully, some day, to beings who don't "speak" at all. As our empathy expands, so do the confines of our own egos. As our compassion grows, we become infinite.

Johanna Warren has translated Natalia Carrero and Juan Valera, and received an NEA Translation Fellowship in 2013 to translate the work of Claudia Hernández.

“In biblical terms, every translated word works to reverse the confusion of tongues, allowing us to temporarily inhabit a long lost state of unity.”

Recommended Translations

Suggestions by the essayists of this book in alphabetical order by author.

A Fool's Life by **Ryunosuke Akutagawa**, translated from the Japanese by Will Peterson.

The Poetics of Space by **Gaston Bachelard**, translated from the French by Maria Jolas.

The Elegance of the Hedgehog by **Muriel Barbery**, translated from the French by Alison Anderson.

Chinese Letter by **Svetislav Basara**, translated from the Serbian by Ana Lucic.

I Never Dared Hope for You by **Christian Bobin**, translated from the French by Alison Anderson.

2666 by **Roberto Bolaño**, translated from the Spanish by Natasha Wimmer.

Labyrinths by **Jorge Luis Borges**, translated from the Spanish by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby.

Alice in Wonderland by **Lewis Carroll**, translated from the English into Chinese by Yuan-ren Chao.

Anton Chekhov: A Life in Letters, translated from the Russian by Rosamund Bartlett and Anthony Phillips.

Claudine at School by **Colette**, translated from the French by Antonia White.

Hopscotch by **Julio Cortázar**, translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa.

Inferno by **Dante**, translated from the Italian by Mary Jo Bang, John Ciardi, Jean Hollander, Robert Pinsky, Allen Mandelbaum, John D. Sinclair, or Charles S. Singleton.

Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone? by **Mahmoud Darwish**, translated from the Arabic by Jeffrey Sacks.

Chronicles of Hell by **Michel de Ghelderode**, translated from the French by George Hauger.

Crime and Punishment by **Fyodor Dostoevsky**, translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.

Notes from Underground by **Fyodor Dostoevsky**, translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett.

A Passenger from the West by **Nabile Farès**, translated from the French by Peter Thompson.

Montauk by **Max Frisch**, translated from the German by Robin Skelton.

Love in the Time of Cholera by **Gabriel García Márquez**, translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman.

Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders by **Alicia Gaspar de Alba**, translated from the English into Spanish by Rosario Sanmiguel.

Dead Souls by **Nikolai Gogol**, translated from the Russian by Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky, Robert Maguire, or Donald Rayfield.

The Tin Drum by **Günter Grass**, translated from the German by Breon Mitchell.

The Valley by **Rolando Hinojosa**, translated from the Spanish by the author.

The Odyssey by **Homer**, translated from the Ancient Greek by Charles Stein.

Too Loud a Solitude by **Bohumil Hrabal**, translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim.

“I, too, Sing America” by **Langston Hughes**, translated from the English into Spanish by Fernández de Castro.

Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong, translated from the Nom by John Balaban.

The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, translated from the Persian by Edward FitzGerald.

The Joke by **Milan Kundera**, translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim.

Nada by **Carmen Laforet**, translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman.

Barabbas by **Pär Lagerkvist**, translated from the Swedish by Alan Blair.

Osip Mandelstam: Selected Poems, translated from the Russian by David McDuff.

Your Face Tomorrow by **Javier Marías**, translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa.

Winnie-the-Pooh by **A.A. Milne**, translated from English to Polish by Irena Tuwim.

Life, a User's Manual by **Georges Perec**, translated from the French by David Bellos.

State of Exile by **Cristina Peri Rossi**, translated from the Spanish by Marilyn Buck.

Eugene Onegin by **Alexander Pushkin**, translated from the Russian by James Falen.

"Archaic Torso of Apollo," by **Rainer Maria Rilke**, translated from the German by Stephen Mitchell.

Late into the Night: The Last Poems of Yannis Ritsos, translated from the Greek by Martin McKinsey.

The Tale of the 1002nd Night by **Joseph Roth**, translated from the German by Michael Hoffman.

Night by **Vedrana Rudan**, translated from the Croatian by Celia Hawkesworth.

If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho, translated from the Ancient Greek by Anne Carson.

The Book of Monelle by **Marcel Schwob**, translated from the French by Kit Schluter

Austerlitz by **W.G. Sebald**, translated from the German by Anthea Bell.

Maidenhair by **Mikhail Shishkin**, translated from the Russian by Marian Schwartz.

The Book of Blam by **Aleksandar Tišma**, translated from the Serbo-Croatian by Michael Henry Heim.

Anna Karenina by **Leo Tolstoy**, translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.

Vain Art of the Fugue by **Dumitru Tsepeneag**, translated from the Romanian by Patrick Camiller.

The Art of Peace by **Morihei Ueshiba**, translated from the Japanese by John Stevens.

The Complete Poetry by **César Vallejo**, translated from the Spanish by Clayton Eshleman.

Dante's Ballad by **Eduardo González Viaña**, translated from the Spanish by Susan Giersbach-Rascón.

The Bible, many translations.

More Recommendations

Suggested publications by the translators who contributed to this anthology (but don't stop at just one!).

[Kazim Ali](#)

The Oasis of Now: Selected Poems by Sohrab Sepehri, translated from the Persian with Mohammad Jafar Mahallati.

[Esther Allen](#)

Rex by José Manuel Prieto, translated from the Spanish.

[Philip Boehm](#)

Damascus Nights by Rafik Schami, translated from the German.

[Edward Gauvin](#)

We Won't See Auschwitz by Jérémie Dres, translated from the French.

[Pierre Joris](#)

*Threadsun*s by Paul Celan, translated from the French.

[Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Howard Goldblatt](#)

Notes of a Desolate Man by Chu T'ien-wen, translated from the Chinese.

[Howard Norman](#)

The Wishing Bone Cycle, an anthology gathered and translated from the Swampy Cree.

[Gregory Pardlo](#)

Pencil of Rays and Spiked Mace by Niels Lyngsø, translated from the Danish.

[Angela Rodel](#)

Nine Rabbits by Virginia Zaharieva, translated from the Bulgarian.

[Rainer Schulte](#)

Selected Poems by Yvan Goll, translated from the German with Michael Bullock.

[Russell Scott Valentino](#)

A Castle in Romagna by Igor Stiks, translated from the Croatian with Tomislav Kuzmanovic.

[Charles Waugh](#)

Family of Fallen Leaves, an anthology edited and translated from the Vietnamese with Huy Lien.

[Johanna Warren](#)

I'm a Box by Natalia Carrero, translated from the Spanish.

[Natasha Wimmer](#)

The Savage Detectives by Robert Bolaño, translated from the Spanish.

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