Languages are actively studied in American high schools and colleges; but seldom are they thoroughly mastered. The pressure of technical and utilitarian subjects is too great; and even greater is the competition of sports and social pleasures. "We are so busy being human," said a youth in self-defense, "that we have no time for the humanities."

The situation could be remedied to some extent if the study of languages were frankly directed to the acquisition of a reading knowledge. To write and speak French or German with correctness, elegance and facility is indeed a heavy undertaking. It must remain a privilege and a luxury. The utilitarians, on their own chosen ground, are right: not one high school graduate in a thousand will have any practical need of writing and speaking any language but his own. On the contrary, a reading knowledge can be acquired with comparatively little effort, and the results it yields are immediate as well as abundant. There is no clerk in a country store whose life would not be enriched if he had direct access to the treasures of another literature. It would give him the exhilaration of release and of spiritual adventure, the welcome sense that the world is not a dismal interminable conglomeration of Gopher Prairies. It would enable him to look upon Gopher Prairie with critical eyes, and by critical, we mean understanding rather than deprecative: "What should they know of Gopher Prairie, who only Gopher Prairie know?"

For that deepening of experience, it is not necessary to be a Cardinal Mezzofanti, who spoke fifty or sixty languages with ease, and was acquainted with many others. The mastery of even a single foreign tongue is sufficient to break down the wall of provincialism. The reform we advocate, shifting the emphasis from the languages in themselves to the literatures they convey, has to face one great moral objection: it would make easy, and even pleasant, a branch of study at present proverbially hard. Our puritanical conscience balks at what might seem a capitulation to slackness. But the puritanical conscience is not always the best guide in matters of pedagogy; and a class in literature can be made as exacting, and if required, as forbidding, as a class in elementary grammar.

But even if the possession of several languages remained a necessary qualification for a scholar and a gentleman, it would not suffice. World masterpieces are found in more languages than even the professional philologist can be expected to master. Rare indeed are the men of culture who can read in the original, and with literary enjoyment, books in Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, Hebrew, and even Greek or Russian. It is an inexorable fact that our main line of approach must be through translation.

Nothing is so stubborn as a fact; but the refusal to face a fact may, for generations, be just as stubborn, and appear successful. To the present day, there are excellent scholars who decline to recognize the validity of any literature in translation. If we were to believe them, we should have no right to be moved by the beauty of the English Bible; it would have been better for Keats if he never had opened Chapman's Homer; it was a mistake for Chapman to translate Homer at all; and we should deny ourselves the illicit pleasure of reading Tolstoy or Dostoevsky in any language but the original Russian. I am hardly exaggerating: I have a letter from a great American critic, who happens to know Russian, but not German. He has stoically deprived himself of the great experience of reading Buddenbrooks and The Magic Mountain, although the perspicuous beauty of Thomas Mann's style survives particularly well the ordeal of translation.

However, it would not be safe to dismiss as absurd the opinion of men whose achievements and judgment we are bound to respect. Their reluctance to accept translation as genuine literature, although excessive, is not difficult to understand. The literary experience, whether in creation or appreciation, requires the intimate fusion of matter and form. The true poetical note is absolutely unique; the same feeling, expressed in different words, no longer is quite the same feeling. It is the exquisitely personal accent that creates style, and honest writing, without style, is business or science, but not literature.

There is profound truth in this contention. But it should not be turned into a rigid dogma; for in literature, truth, no less than beauty, depends on delicate and elusive shades rather than upon hard and fast distinctions. There are cases in which translation stands condemned; there are others in which, however inadequate, it will serve; there are others still in which the gain is immeasurably greater than the loss.

It is on the lowest level that the impossibility of translation is most apparent: hardly any pun can be rendered into another language. In French, Pierre means both Peter and a rock; in English, the identity disappears. Rustand's Cyrano de Bergerac is a crackling machine-gun fire of puns, including the aggravad kind known as à peu prés, or near-pun. The play was one of the less a brilliant success in many languages. Rough equivalents did the trick. What signified was not the actual pun, a poor thing at best, but the punning spirit, an evidence of insolent gaiety and bravado, as prominent a feature in Cyrano's picturesque figure as his waving plume or his enormous nose.

Almost as untranslatable as the pun is the melody of words. If a poem is sheer music in the material sense, if sound is emphasized at the expense of thought or feeling, then the magic disappears when the medium of expression is changed. Swinburne's alliterations, excessive even in English, would become nonsensical in French. Edgar Poe's The Belle would turn into a jarring jingle. The opulent rhythms and sprightly rhythms of Théodore de Banville, which, in French, have a lovely, lightsome, fantastic effect, would, in any other language, seem mere verbal acrobatics. There again, the loss is small: no poem is supreme by virtue of music alone. If literal translation is an impossibility, imitation remains open, provided it be deemed worth while.

There is, however, a subtler, less obtrusive kind of music which is the very essence of poetry, and which evaporates in transposition. The lines

Break, break, break,
On thy cold gray stones, o sea!

have in their absolute simplicity the true Tennysonian ring, which is not to be despised. George du Maurier, in his delightful Fers Nonnusiques à l'Usage des Familles Angloises, offered this rendering:

Cassez-vous, cassez-vous, cassez-vous,
O mer, sur vos froids grès cailloux!

which is literally perfect, and perfectly ludicrous. This is willful parody; but it clearly indicates a line which translation can hardly attempt to cross without self-destruction. The difficulty is not the same in every language and with every poet; and there may be translators whose miraculous gifts push back the limits of possibility; but, if the danger line is flexible, it is none the less inexorable.

It would be idle to deny that certain authors can never be fully known in translation. Byron's obvious attitude made him a European figure; Shelley's unearthly music is appreciated abroad only by a handful of thorough scholars. All that most Americans understand of Victor Hugo's verse is the resounding rhetoric. The marvelous orchestration, the poignant delicacy which constantly accompanies the enormous blare and is not drowned by it, the underlying sense of tragic mystery and awe, all this is lost on the foreign reader; so that Victor Hugo in World Literature remains the very great popular romançer of Les Misérables, rather than the supreme lyric and epic poet of Contemplations and The Legend of the Centaurs.

However, Mark Van Doren's daring and very successful Anthology of World Poetry has proved that there was at least a craving for the enlargement of our lyrical experience beyond