the confines of our native speech. Granted that the best of these efforts are adaptations rather than literal renderings; in the case of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam and Fitzgerald, a hybrid, the fruit of a sublime collaboration, rather than even an adaptation; still we are the richer by this strain toward the unattainable. Goethe’s Wanderers’ Nightongs, done into English by Longfellow, are not quite Goethe’s, but they are better than anything else in Longfellow.

Poetry, or that poetical element which is the essence of all style worthy of the name, is music as well as sense. But the music does not necessarily reside in the words. The overtones which make expression truly great are in the soul, not in the voice. This may sound like idealistic nonsense: let us take a concrete illustration. There is magic in the distant sound of bugle or hunting horn in the woods at eve. On this obvious theme, Tennyson wrote “The splendid falls...” in The Princess; Alfred de Vigny, The Horn. Tennyson’s lyric is a masterly technical achievement. He is coolly aware of the opportunities offered by the theme, and coolly determined to display the resources of his art. With the unerring selection of gorgeous echoing words, with inner rhymes, alliterations, repetitions, he describes the effect of music with a skill we frankly—and coolly—admire. Tennyson is untranslatable: a transcription of this marvelous transcription would fall flat. It would be another Cæsæ rum, cæsæ rum, cæsæ rum. Vigny is not a virtuoso, but a stoic. We hear no audible music: we feel by inner response the deep vibrations of music in a grave and tender soul. The words are not indifferent; they are perfect in French, in their quiet restraint. But equally perfect words in English could restore exactly the innermost song that is in Vigny. This, of course, could be achieved only by a great poet, with the dramatist’s gift of sympathetic insight; but it is not inconceivable. Vigny’s poem is at least a candidate for World Literature; Tennyson’s cannot leave its native soil.

The truth in this matter was expressed by the Greek critic Longinus many centuries ago: there is a sublime, which is inherent in the thought, and which therefore is universal. Longinus gave as an example: “Let there be light”—perhaps the first time the Bible was appreciated purely as literature. The stark majesty of these words stands unaltered in Hebrew, in Greek, in English; and it would lose nothing in Tagalog or in Esperanto.

In every great writer, there are verbal felicities, which must remain within the circle of the original language, and deeper notes, capable of appealing to all mankind. If the quips and pranks and spirited conceits cannot be translated, they may, in many cases, be imitated very much in the same vein; the call of the soul to the soul is direct, profound and universal. The Elizabethan clevernesses of Shakespeare are delightful because of their English accent. There are moments when Shakespeare is not “Elizabethan,” not “English” and not “clever”: he is Shakespeare. “To be or not to be,” “The rest is silence,” belong to the world.

So there is a World Literature even in the realm of poetry, which seems hopelessly divided by language barriers. The greatest French poet of our age, Paul Claudel, learned his art from the Bible, Walt Whitman, and perhaps even Nietzsche, not from Boileau, Lamartine, or Verlaine. American lovers of poetry are more deeply influenced by Villon, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and, in a limited field, Heredia, than by certain American classics that every child knows by heart.

In the case of prose, the objection is slightly different. The harmonics and overtones which, it is alleged, belong to the language and cannot be translated, are not strictly musical, but cultural. Two words like king and roi, like boy and garçon, may be given as equivalent in the dictionary, but their connotations are different. He who was not brought up in the American scene, whose ears were not attuned to American speech, whose palate does not respond to American savors, will never fully understand American letters. Whatever lexicographers may say, no finn au poison can ever hope to be pumpkin pie. Conversely, it is argued that no American can ever read a foreign book without inflicting upon it some distortion, at times frankly ludicrous.