own right, and may be a great artist. He does not mechanically transmit a work of art: he interprets and re-creates it. Paradoxically, a singer may be greater than his song, an actor than the text he is using as his medium. Sarah Bernhardt gave some semblance of poetical life to the gaudy melodramas of Victorien Sardou, and Sir Henry Irving to even cheaper plays, like Tha Bolli.

But if the common run of translations is poor, it should not be forgotten that the art has been practiced by the very greatest, Goethe and Schiller translated both masterpieces and trifles. In England, Chaucer, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Fielding, Coleridge, Carlyle, George Eliot, did not spurn the lowly craft. Nor is the tradition in abeyance; for among translators in the twentieth century could be mentioned the leaders in French literature, Maurice Maeterlinck, Paul Claudel, André Gide, Marcel Proust, Jules Romains; in America, George Santanyana, Ludwig Lewisohn, Van Wyck Brooks, Edna St. Vincent Millay. . . . The contributors of translations to Mark Van Doren’s Anthology of World Poetry constitute a very creditable roll of fame.

That great writers should consent to act as translators need not surprise us. In one respect, the translator’s attitude is one of humility; he abdicates initiative, he is willing to serve, not to command. In another respect, translation means profound collaboration. What exultation if Goethe, at the height of his fame, had consented to accept our aid! Now that he can no longer help himself, we are free to impose our partnership upon him. But that partnership possesses to a high degree the same merits as co-operation with the living man. It compels us to attune ourselves to his thoughts, to his moods, to his familiar and unconscious tricks. We must create in ourselves a self after Goethe’s image, before we can translate Goethe at all. Every word not of the obvious kind is a challenge. We have to surmise the exact shade that Goethe had in mind, even—sacreligious thought—when Goethe’s mind had remained in a convenient haze. So every translation worthy of the name becomes an interpretation, a commentary, a criticism. Nothing should be more ennobling than this wrestling with a great spirit. Like Jacob with the angel, we can compel a blessing.

However, we need advanced courses—and very arduous courses they would be—in thorough translation. A version of some foreign classic, combining scholarly care with literary merit, might very well be accepted in lieu of a Master’s thesis. And, in self-defense against botchers, conscientious translators should band themselves into an effective guild. They should insist that the work even of their qualified members be submitted to a competent board of revision; the editors of the very best firms are notoriously slack in this respect. Authors, publishers, public, need to be protected against uncritical mediocrities.

There is one advantage that a translation possesses over an original work: it can be amended, and if need be discarded and superseded. We may feel that Proust’s last volumes were left in a very imperfect condition; but we have no right to correct or complete his manuscript. And, when a masterpiece grows archaic, like Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, we greatly hesitate (far more than our ancestors did) before attempting to modernize it. Classic rank imposes upon a text a frozen dignity perilously akin to death. With a translation, our freedom is restored. Professor Zeitlin, for instance, in his very fine edition of Montaigne’s Essays, did not feel compelled to reprint Cotton’s version verbatim. The French are still trying to translate Shakespeare: it is to be hoped that each new version is both more Shakespearean and more French than the last. It is meet that every century, nay every generation, should have its own Homer and its own Dante. T. E. Lawrence’s Odyssey and W. H. D. Rouse’s Story of Odysseus, in a most welcome fashion, have renewed the freshness of that great tale of adventure.

Our conception of World Literature, to sum up this long discussion, is but the negation of a negation. It is the refusal to accept as final, in matters of the spirit, the limitations of political allegiance or local dialect. Our field is living literature. Whatever quickens in us the sense of life is part of our literature, even though it was first said in Hebrew or in Greek. Conversely, a writer may still be active, and he may use the purest “American”: if he means nothing to us, he is dead.

In thus defining the domain of literature without reference to the map, we are not preaching internationalism: we are only noting elementary and uncontroversial facts. It is those who would introduce the question of nationality into the esthetic field who are guilty of injecting a political element where it does not belong. This is as futile as to inject it into religion or science. In culture, internationalism is the basic fact. Isolation, on the other hand, is delusion or self-mutilation.

But this brand of internationalism is perfectly compatible with the highest patriotism. If we love our own country, we shall be all the more eager to enrich it with the best which has ever been written in the world, and, reciprocally, we shall desire to contribute our best to the common board of mankind. There is no place in all this for an inferiority complex. English Literature, of which the American branch is no less vigorous and no less legitimate than the British, is, by universal consent, second to none. We give, and we are more than willing to give, fully as much as we receive. Let us have the freest trade in spiritual goods: we need not be afraid of an adverse balance.

Summary

For World Literature to come into existence, the language barrier must be overcome. This cannot be done except through the acquisition of foreign languages—a formidable task, if by acquisition we mean thorough mastery. But a mere reading knowledge is far more accessible, and would bring abundant reward to every high school student.

However, not even professional scholars can know even all the major culture languages, and the indispensable element of World Literature is translation. But translation is still distrusted, and even despised. It is claimed that in art intention and form are inseparable, and that every translation is bound to destroy this vital unity.

Obviously no translation can render literally that which depends altogether upon the sounds of a particular language: puns or verbal music. Only equivalents can be offered. Lyric poetry is far more difficult to render into a foreign tongue than narrative or drama. Plain sense, on the other hand, can easily be translated; and, beyond plain sense, there is a poetry which lies in the ideas or feelings themselves and their association. This deeper poetry also can be translated: the supreme passages in the Bible and Shakespeare are universal in their appeal.

Every book, even in our own language and dealing with our own country, requires a translation from the terms of the writer’s experience to those of the reader’s. Fortunately, man is able to make such an adjustment, and to feel the human element under the infinite variety of forms. Without such a capacity, there could be no communication between man and man. It is the extension of this capacity that makes communication possible between age and age, nation and nation, language and language, and accounts for the undeniable existence of World Literature.

In spite of grievous handicaps, translation has been practiced by great writers in the past, and the tradition is not lost. It is an exacting but ennobling task to co-operate with a foreign genius, to attune yourself to his thought, and to make his words your words.

Translation offers one advantage over original work: it can more readily be corrected, perfected, brought up to date, by successive generations. Every age has, and should have, its new translation of Homer or Dante.