

Literature–Translation–Criticism

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Today's world is faced with the twin problems of allowing differences and disallowing discriminations. Differences are necessary in all fields including art and literature. Difference means independence and creativity. Difference is also the motive force behind all creation. God was already two when He created the universe—there never was an indivisible unity and there never will be. What does this mean in the realm of literature? It means first of all that we have not only to take cognizance of 'small' languages and literatures but also respect them for what they are. This is especially urgent now than ever before since the world is being turned into a global village. Free market was once an exception but now the rule, for free market has on its side the philosophy of the survival of the fittest. However, it also turns out that the Darwinian theory was not absolutely correct: the life world did not evolve entirely on the basis of 'free for all': on the other hand, there was much hitch-hiking and piggyback riding in the evolution of the life. But there has always been a tendency on the part of the big and the mighty to dominate the small and the fragile. Witness thus the craze on the part of many writers writing in the less-known languages to be translated into English. It is as if you have not arrived if your works have not been recycled through English. Several writers belonging to these language groups have started writing in English straightaway to avoid the perceived 'subalternity' of translations. Surely, these tendencies may spring from a genuine urge to reach the largest reading public, to go global. But who will nourish their own language—a language which housed them in the first instance? It has been said that English is not one language but many languages. Fine enough, that is good logic; one may also say that what these writers are doing is subverting the dominant language from within. This is all very good so long as there is a sustaining life force for these writers to carry out this subversion—that is, so long there is Korean, Chinese, Japanese and Kannada and the culture and history embodied in them.

Borrowing, adaptation, sometimes blind imitation is necessary for the growth of a culture. It is here that translation plays an important role. There are many theories of translation today: for example, some say that a translated text should read like an original text in the language into which it has been translated; some say that a translated text should read like a translation. Talking about contemporary translations of foreign texts into German, Goethe said: "Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. ... The error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue." By this, Goethe, however, did not mean that every translation should result in a kind of hybridization of the receptor language. He said: "[The translator] must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect; however, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly." We later find Walter Benjamin taking up

this idea seriously enough in his essay “The Task of the Translator.” He too appeals to the notion of a primordial language; translation, according to him, can make a language to go back to this primordiality to rejuvenate itself. Indeed, as current theories of translation have shown, it is difficult to lay down any rule for translation; one has to accept the fact that when cultural variables and contingencies are so many, translation cannot but be multifarious. What is important is the interest in the other and all translations stem from that basic fact. Often, translation may be based on a misreading of the original text but it still can have a galvanizing effect on the language.

But cultural contact is also basically corrosive: a dominant culture may just gobble up a small culture. The example from language contact may be illustrative. It is said that bilingualism is the first step towards hara-kiri. When the native speakers of a small language come into contact with a dominant language, especially the language of the colonizers, the speakers learn the new language of power, become bilingual, develop an inferiority complex about their own language, use it less and less, force their children to learn the language of the masters and let their native language die. Not only the languages of the masters but also their religion, food, dress and such other practices become the model to follow. Translation from a dominant language to a subordinate one always has this risk, but the risk has to be taken. There is no other way.

Just like language, literature too works at multiple levels: we talk about universal language, Chomsky’s Universal Grammar, which is a defining feature of humanity without reference to race, creed and culture. There are also languages and their dialects. Nobody speaks a universal language, not even a language but only a dialect or an idiolect. Similarly, we talk about World Literature, but nobody writes or reads World Literature; we write and read regional literatures only. What then is this relationship between universality and locality? Seamus Heaney says that every poet has double citizenship—he is a citizen of his locality as well as a citizen of conscience. When one enters literature, one enters these two realms simultaneously. You cannot be in one without at the same time being in the other.

Literature today is a much contested field. Some years ago one could safely say what is meant by literature but today it is everything or nothing. This is mainly because of the inexorable advancement of Literary Theory—which in itself is an agonistic realm of conceptual frameworks. It is common knowledge now that books of criticism sell better than poetry and many writers are dismayed by this. Certainly Theory holds a fascination for many young people. Creative writers are piqued by the fact that a ‘secondary’ and ‘parasitical’ mode should steal a march over a ‘primary’ and ‘autonomous’ mode like poetry. But this is a mistaken notion; theory or literary criticism in general is neither ‘secondary’ nor ‘parasitical.’ Furthermore, there is nothing ‘primary’ or ‘autonomous’ about poetry or such other creative works: both take their sap from life. Criticism is at best conjunctive to literary works.

And yet, the fascination of criticism needs to be explained. Why do more people read criticism than literary works? The reason may be the indirect mode of literary works. Readers are often baffled by this indirection. Literary works do not seem to *talk* to them; they see their formal aspects but are not sure about their meaning. Readers generally have an affective relationship towards creative works but are unable to have a communicative dialogue. This is the very space of literary criticism in all its forms; for it seems to be the *voice* of literature.

Literary works stand at an angle to the world—as E. M. Forster says of Cavafy, the great Greek poet. Not even criticism can look at a creative work squarely—it can only hypothesize about it. There is a beautiful poem by Rilke called “Orpheus–Hermes–Eurydice.” The poem takes as its theme the well known myth of Orpheus’ second loss of his beloved wife Eurydice as he disobeys the command that he should not look at her before reaching the earth. What is strikingly beautiful about Rilke’s poem is the way he describes the whole scenario—as if the process of the coming of Eurydice is nothing but the creative process itself. Eurydice has only a very vague memory of her past; she could not even recognize her husband; she is fragile and ethereal—in a sense primordial. By turning back to look at her, the whole vision is lost for Orpheus: she returns to where she came from. There is a profound sense of grief in the poem—which is not described directly. Literature in general and poetry in particular is like that: it doesn’t stand direct gaze.