

## Translation As A Liberal Art: Notes Towards a Definition

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This lecture is a kind of report to the College Community on the work of the Committee on the Liberal Arts. Our charge is to examine or re-examine the principles and practices of this still unique curriculum in liberal education. There is the possibility that we may have a need to find other ways to talk to ourselves and to others about what we do and why, because the world has undergone great changes since 1937, and questions of education perhaps ought to be viewed from new perspectives; our thirty-eight years of experience might suggest desirable changes in our practices; most importantly, the discussions brought about in the course of such re-examination might serve to clarify and reformulate for ourselves some areas that have become or have remained obscure.

The topic I have chosen to talk about tonight, abstractly put, is the role of language studies in a liberal curriculum. I shall argue that this role is to impart the arts of translation, or at least to provide the occasion for understanding what these arts are and what translation is.

If this is an abstract statement, a more concrete and parochial way of putting it would be, "What is really supposed to be going on in the Language Tutorials anyway? And why?" I know that these are questions, even vexed questions. I have encountered them with students, with colleagues, with myself. So I shall try to give at least a partial account of the matter as I now see it after some experience, some reading, and some discussion.

With respect to this last, I must say that the views I shall be expressing are my own. I hope my colleagues on the Committee will recognize that what I say bears some essential relation to our common discussions, that this is, so to speak, my partial account of a journey we have taken together. But I do not think of myself as reporting a consensus, or anything like it.

The subjects of Liberal Education, of Language Studies and of Translation are all frighteningly large, and I reassure you that I do not intend to wield so wide a brush. I shall begin with a much compressed exposition of two underlying theses:

1. Liberal Education in the abstract need not necessarily involve the study of foreign languages or the discipline of interlingual translation. But concretely for us here and now, because of the particular ways our culture has developed, any liberal curriculum simply must address the facts and consequences of the many languages that have existed and that now co-exist in our culture. This is not a misfortune, because as it turns out in practice (and this is my second thesis),
2. Interlingual translation is a special and highly visible case of a more generic act of the human understanding which is properly called *translation* (or *interpretation* if I may offer a separate term for the moment in order to avoid

confusion.) This generic sense of translation is the paradigmatic act of the human understanding, and as such is an indispensable element of liberal education... one might even say *the* indispensable element.

My first thesis was that liberal education in the abstract does not necessarily involve a study of foreign languages and translation. So far as I know, neither Plato nor Aristotle, who were deeply interested in liberal education in the most impeccable sense of the word, ever suggests that the education of an Athenian gentlemen should include the study of Persian or Carthaginian or even Egyptian. On the other hand, one knows well enough that the Greeks could speak these languages for practical purposes--- what you might call Berlitz Carthaginian.

A further observation. Neither Plato nor Aristotle seems to think the reading or the writing of books is of much importance, though both obviously read them, both wrote them and both were interested practically and theoretically in liberal education. Plato, indeed, at the end of the *Phaedrus*, expresses the most serious doubts about the value of writings. I am quite sure that both would have rejected out of hand the idea of introducing a Great Books course at the Academy or the Lyceum; while the notion of including the study of Persian would have seemed a barbarism.

So the idea of liberal education without studies in foreign languages is seriously thinkable, since it has been seriously thought by Plato and Aristotle.

But what about US? What about St. John's College?

The point, I think, is that we are not in Athens in 400 B.C. We are here in the U.S. 2400 years later. There is no really adequate way to say that an awful lot has happened in between.

It is pretty foolish to attribute unique causes for any great change, and I do not wish to fall into that folly. Nevertheless, one crucially important element of the cultural metamorphoses that have come about since 400 B.C. is the technique of writing (and almost trivially by comparison, the technique of printing). In the two and a half millennia that separate us from the greatness of Athens, we have gone bookish. Our world has gone bookish.

That may sound like a mere denigration. I do not mean it so. Let me put it more interestingly. We have, you might say, become a *scriptural* culture. We believe (or we have believed for a long time—the *status quo* is inscrutable) in the importance and efficacy of *scripta*, of things written down. This faith is evangelical. We believe that universal literacy is a self-evident good; and we promote it with money, with theory, and, curiously, pursue it with diminishing success. Our national rate of functional illiteracy has recently been discovered to be very high, perhaps 25%.

We tend to equate literacy with education. It is a degraded version of a democratic dogma that the citizen who *can* read *will* read and therefore will be free. This dogma of literacy has been translated into a totalitarian version. In a technological society it is hard to control the minds and use the brains and productive powers of citizens who cannot read a little.

The technique of reading has for so long seemed to be the simple solution to literacy that we have grown single-minded, and even simple-minded, on the subject.

We appear to have forgotten that books alone will not do much. The preoccupation with books and the power to read books—with the *technique*, that is—has tended to make us forget tradition, or to confuse it with books themselves.

Tradition is always oral. It is tradition that makes it clear *why* books should be read and *how* they should be read. In fact, “tradition” literally means the handing on of the Scriptures. In the Roman Church, for example, the tradition is of equal authority with Scripture. If we forget what oral tradition is, or lose it, and come to rely exclusively upon writings, we are in danger of losing the Word. Books are at best, as Socrates tells Phaedrus, mnemonic devices, not memory.

Because this is an important point, let me offer a clear example. We have the texts of Shakespeare’s plays, by now restored rather well. We have also much information about the Elizabethan theatre; notes on performances by witnesses; libraries on Elizabethan everyday life, politics, religion, popular culture, music and so on. Nevertheless, we have no accurate idea of how the plays were actually performed. We know none of the stage business; we don’t know how the music was handled. We don’t know how the actors read soliloquies. Dozens of things actors, producers and readers of Shakespeare need to know, we can’t guess and will never know. Why? Because in 1640 the Puritans closed the theatres and kept them closed for twenty years. By 1660 when they reopened nobody who knew how it had been done was around to pass on the tradition.

Lettered societies are peculiarly vulnerable to such losses. Unlettered ones rely altogether on tradition. They have their problems, too, but different ones.

I am not sure how we became bookish, but I can make up a likely story. It began happening before the beginning of our era, and had two sources, one Philosophical and one Religious. The Romans, impressed by the Greeks, and enamoured of them, tried to bring Athens across the Adriatic to Italy. Cicero tried to invent Latin equivalents for Greek philosophical terms and to write philosophy in Latin. Vergil tried, and in extraordinary measure succeeded, in realizing the Roman experience in Latin verses by a transformation of the Homeric models.

As for the religious source, there was already a tradition among the Jews of preserving, interpreting and transmitting the sacred books among the Hebrew people. Christianity, contrariwise, with its ethic of evangelism, published its gospels and epistles abroad in the common language. A Greek translation of the Old Testament was published in the third century B.C. By the fourth century, St. Jerome is turning the Bible into Latin. Hebrew, Greek, and Latin became the great repositories of our religious culture. One remarks that the evangelism of Biblical translation has been a persistent and accelerating enterprise up to the present.

Once given primary texts of universally acknowledged importance and power, secondary texts accumulate—translations, exegeses, commentaries, and in the case of secular works, imitations as well. All are, in a general way, interpretive.

Something like this is the way translation became a liberal art. We believe in the sanctity, the wisdom, the efficacy of books as reliquaries of our collective experience. Meditation on the experience recorded there produces more and more writings. And it produces techniques of textual interpretation and of writing as well.

A second consequence that followed from the techniques of writing down sacred texts and studying them is the production of a complex cultural

multilingualism. Transcribing the spoken word produces strange metamorphoses. Speech, which has its essential being in motion, is made to be still. That which is a musical act of voice and ear falls silent, but becomes visible to the eye. It is brought out of passing time and transplanted into space. And that which has its only being as it passes living through the present is fixed, bound fast to past time. It is, as you might say, fossilized, like a fern or a trilobite.

This means that words once written down grow old, become old-fashioned, archaic, eventually intelligible only to scholars, and then not even to them. Think of the languages of Mark Twain, Jane Austen, Shakespeare, Chaucer, the forms becoming increasingly remote and strange to us. Because of writing. Of course, it is also true that we still *have* them, that we *can read* them. They *are still here*. I did not mean to suggest that writing was an unqualifiedly bad thing that had happened, so much as a surpassingly strange thing of uncertain quality, a technique familiar to us of which we may not be fully aware.

And if writing has preserved in fossilized form the language of the past, it has also produced a polyglot culture in the present. Latin died as a vernacular and new vernaculars formed from it, as Italian, French, and Spanish, which now exist, side by side, in their commonness and difference. New dimensions are imposed upon the situation, for we find ourselves at various removes from contemporaneous vernaculars within the greater common culture, while within these the problem of fossilization ramifies. That is, Rabelais writes French, but not French that is spoken anywhere in France today.

Since we have put all our cultural eggs in this one basket, reading, our notions of education and of liberal education will naturally be centered in reading and books. The old "classical" education centered around the reading of the Greek and Latin classics. It worked because university students had spent their preparatory years learning to read and write those languages. They might, and usually did, also learn some modern vernaculars, but these were not to the point of a liberal education.

The idea of Great Books is an extension of the classical notion. It includes Greek and Roman authors among great books, but adds many vernacular works as being of equal stature and importance.

Such an idea implies some doctrine of translation. Of 80 authors on our reading list, 16-1/2 write in English. (The 1/2 is Chaucer.) All the rest we must and do read in English translation. The only alternative, setting as a student pre-requisite a reading knowledge of three ancient and six modern languages, is not really to the point.

But why is translation a problem? We are all used to it. Is it really a problem?

There is a saying, and a true one, that all translation betrays. Cervantes says that reading a translation is like looking at the reverse side of a Flemish tapestry—it is full of threads which partially obscure the figures, while the colors and textures are all wrong. A translator of Baudelaire's poems speaks of "these poems shipwrecked in English." T.S. Eliot once said, with some spleen, that the translations of Gilbert Murray are a greater obstacle to the understanding of Greek drama than the Greek language. Others make analogous judgments about Jowett's Plato, Ross's Aristotle, Lattimore's Homer. If they are right, does not the doubt arise that we may

be engaged in a kind of parody of education? That our understanding of the books we read will be a cumulative distortion? This question must be faced. One can hardly say it doesn't matter. But to face it will require some considered view of translation.

A second problem (and this is the topic of the second of the two theses I set out at the beginning) is different from but not separable from the matter of linguistic translation—the matter of reading Homer in modern English. Once one gets across that linguistic threshold and makes his peace with the inevitable distortions, he comes face to face with other quite alien things that he must make something of. I mean things like the very peculiar gods of the Iliad, or that one of the New Testament, the chorus in Greek plays. Or of Aristotle's queer insistence that Nature is an artist, a notion he seems to be very serious about, or Descartes' trying to prove that he exists.

These things seem to require of us an effort very like that of linguistic translation. And all of this must be approached by way of the words in whatever language we read them.

Eventually one discovers the ultimate outrage. Twentieth century authors writing contemporary English—poets, novelists, philosophers, scientists, theologians—also seem to need translation! Translation does not seem essentially to be a question of *foreign* languages, but of language itself.

### THE HUMAN ESSENCE

The power of speech is the central and defining mystery of human nature. To say that we speak, that we have a language, is to name our essential nature. It is to say *what* we are, *how* we are. This does not *explain* anything, much less *explain it away*, and I do not offer the proposition in any such spirit. One does not approach mysteries thus. In calling it a mystery I mean that it is a subject for radical philosophical wonder. Nor is this any secret; everyone knows it. But as a defining mystery our possession is a thing to be contemplated, wondered at, rejoiced in; cherished; and cultivated.

I repeat, *cultivated*. Speech does not come of itself like teeth or puberty. It is a thing that must be taught; must be learnt; and therefore must be cultivated. Since speech is our very nature, when our speech goes bad, when our powers toward language diminish, we are to that extent dehumanized. Our ability to understand ourselves, our fellows, our world in general is reduced. We become less intelligent.

This truth is commonly recognized. The study of language, of one's mother-tongue at least, has always and without question been thought an essential part of any common education, and *a fortiori* of any liberal or humane education. In some epochs the study of languages *was* humane education.

(One might remark that we seem to be entering upon a period of linguistic diminution and impotence. The phenomena are so complex that it is difficult to think about causes. But the academic muddle about the whys and hows and wherefores of language studies cannot help.)

I should now like to devote a few moments to some wonderings about the mystery of human language.

First, speech is in part a physical act which has a mental counterpart. It is, I think, the true locus of the mind-body problem (so-called); and theologically, of the mystery of the incarnation. But to consider it in its bodily aspects, it seems a cause for wonder that this essential power has no intrinsic, no proper, no exclusive organ, as sight has the eye. From the view of neurophysiology, it seems that in order to speak we must achieve an unimaginably complex coordination of an assembly of organs belonging properly to our digestive and respiratory systems, systems that appear to have absolutely no essential relation to speech. But the ear is also indispensably involved, for if we cannot hear others and ourselves speaking, neither do we speak. Very little is understood of the physiology of hearing.

Thus it appears that the “organ” (if we may call it so) of external speech is a concerted function of tongue, lips, teeth, lungs, ribs, diaphragm, all working in sympathetic response to the inward and outer ear. It is almost as if the power of speech itself, the very need for speech (mental or cerebral), as if the sheer capacity for it had dragooned improbable recruits and made them serve a prince whose end is in a realm beyond any potentiality apparent in their own natures.

I am aware that this is a metaphor—in fact, an allegory. And yet—and yet—unless one’s faith in blind efficient causes is such as to move mountains, it seems difficult to say how otherwise it could have come about that we can speak.

Second, I have said that the power to speak defines our kind. This power is a strange kind of essential attribute, for it can be actualized in literally thousands of quite different ways. I mean that nobody speaks a common human language. There is no such thing. Instead, quite astonishingly, there are now spoken on earth not less than 5000 mutually unintelligible languages. In the course of man’s sojourn on earth—Dr. Mary Leakey assures us within the month that it is at least 3.5 million years, reliably carbon dated from the jawbones of two hominids of East Africa—there must have been very many more. Probably no one would venture to guess a number, but it would certainly be very large; for it seems that a relatively small isolated human group can generate a natural language. (I do not say *invent* a language, for that is a quite different matter and may not be possible at all.) In the course of our racial existence, then, great numbers of languages must have come into existence and died away, as the groups who spoke them were conquered, exterminated, or simply died out. Languages die each year in our own time. And then, of course, others have come, and may be coming, into being. Even now.

Why should there be so many languages? What sense can we make of it? If one assumes, for example, that language is essentially for communication, why not one language? Why should not a common human speech have been programmed into the genes? Why not human intercommunication as there is human fertility of interbreeding? Why not a correlation of language with race? Or with geography? Why this prodigality?

Third, in thinking about human language, we must quickly discard superficial evolutionary notions that most of the 5000 languages or “primitive.” There is a vague popular notion that as the blowgun is to the H-Bomb, so must be the language of the Kalahari Bushmen to English—or Russian or Chinese. In fact, the languages of those we are pleased to call “primitive,” “backward” or “undeveloped” peoples are at least as complex, at least as metaphysically subtle, and discriminating, at least as

eloquent, as those of us forward and developed peoples. Technological proficiency appears to have no linguistic correlate. Does not this seem to suggest that human language is not primarily a utilitarian power and certainly not exclusively such?

This, though, opens other speculative possibilities. If we discard self-gratulatory notions of progress, is it not conceivable that the great age of the human race was long ago? Suppose we conceive a society based upon speech and understanding, say, upon myth, poetry, song, philosophy, law, prayer, perhaps writing? Nothing of such a world would have survived, except what is imbedded in surviving languages, because this world would have produced no hard objects, no palaces or potsherds. Why should it not be so? Something like this is the contents of the myths of the Golden Age, of Eden, and of Babel.

Fourth, join me in a final speculation. Given that some 5000 languages now exist, can you imagine that there might be some pair of them such that they cannot in any way be translated, either into the others? Could there, that is, be an absolute linguistic abyss that cannot *in principle* be crossed? Why or why not? What would be the conditions for the possibility of inter-lingual translation? Or for its impossibility?

I myself cannot conceive it. The impossibility of the conception seems to be me the ground of the Myth of Babel... that there was a mythological time... *illud tempus*... when all men spoke the same tongue and all were mutually intelligible. Recall in passing that during the Trojan War all of the men and the gods and even the horses of Achilles seem naturally to speak one tongue. It is true that Zeus employs Hermes and Iris as go-betweens; but they seem less to be interpreters of tongues than of the divine will, though I am not sure of this.

As a second experiment of imagination, can you imagine a world in which all men speak the same tongue? It is both an old dream and a new one. But what sort of a dream does it seem to be? Would it be a world without translation? Is it a happy prospect of universal brotherhood? Or is it an Orwellian nightmare? More and more of the world's peoples are, for practicality's sake, learning English somehow. What are we to think of this?

### TRANSLATION

It is not easy to say exactly what translation is. As with Augustine considering time, we seem driven to say, "I know what it is until you ask me."

Larousse has a witty definition; *traduire: faire passer un ouvrage d'une langue dans une autre*. "To cause a work to pass out of one language into another." This seems to me less a definition than a brilliantly neutral way of framing a metaphor. No agent is mentioned or implied. The action itself is taken for granted, as is the *ouvrage* which is "made to pass." But what kind of passing is this? Is it as wine is caused to pass from the bottle to the glass? Are the two languages somehow receptacles for the *ouvrage*? Can the *ouvrage* be passed back and forth? Can it be put into any such receptacle? Or is the work caused to pass from one to another as water is changed to wine? Daphne to laurel? The pumpkin to a coach?

The definition is clear, precise, and you don't know what it means.

As it turns out, the trouble isn't with the lexicographer, who has done a brilliant job. The fact is that a twofold difficulty exists, first with our words for

translation, and second, with the notion itself. As to the first, reference to the etymologies shows that our normal meaning of *translation*, inter-lingual passage, is a special and restrictive sense of a broader root meaning. To convey that broader meaning one is tempted to try to *interpret* in its general sense. This will make the distinction—but only until you recall that *interpret* is subject to the same difficulties. (One can speak of being an *interpreter* at the U.N.) So because we tend to infer the interlingual sense of the terms, we consider the broader meanings to be metaphorical extensions—as in “I didn’t know how to interpret his laughter” or “She translated her words into actions.” Actually, these are quite proper in the basic sense.

The second part of the difficulty with words for *translation* is that the notion itself is quite abstract, so that its linguistic expression is necessarily and visibly figurative. Let me try to convey this from three cases: 1. *Translate* fr. Latin *transfero*; *trans* + *fero*, “to bear or carry across.” 2. *Traduire*: Lat. *Trans* + *ducere*, “to lead across,” especially across water. 3. *Interpret*: Lat. *Interpretari*; *inter* + root *pret*, between or among + to level, make plain, hence “to smooth out between,” “negotiate,” “be a go-between” (like Mr. Kissinger.)

The Romans themselves tended to use *vertere* or *convertere*: “to turn something into something else” or “convert,” as Daphne into the laurel, or pagans into Christians. We have it in the linguistic context in such phrases as “The *Iliad* of Homer turned out of Greek and into English by Mr. A. Pope.” It is the image of metamorphosis. (You will now observe how well Larousse has handled the matter after all.)

The root notion seems to be that of a separating distance between or among two or more (unspecified) elements, a distance that is to be negotiated by *labor* (bear, carry,) or with skill and knowledge (*to lead*.)

It is often unclear what one really learns from etymologies, but many of our most common colloquialisms confirm the essential rightness of the ones we have just examined. Consider:

“Can’t we *reach* an agreement?” or “come to an understanding?”

“You’re not *getting across*.”

“Can we *get together* on this?” “No, we’re still *miles apart*.”

“We are at an *impasse*.”

“Can’t we find *some way*?”

What is being expressed here is a fact of human existence that we all know intimately. It is that sudden dreadful discovery of an abyss of understanding that opens and exists between ourselves and another, friend, parent, lover, husband or wife, a teacher, “the authorities,” God. This awful, palpable distance is *real* distance, metaphysical distance, between the unknower and the unknown, a kind of distance metaphorically figured in physical or geographical distance. The term, *translation*, I believe, properly and essentially refers to the passage across this separating metaphysical distance. If I understand what I am saying, I think it is the abyss between Same and Other.

The distance between human understandings is not only traversed by words; it is also created and maintained by words. This is often a very good thing, or to a certain extent a good thing. If the abyss were not there at all, we should all dissolve

into otherness, lose identity and privacy. On the other hand, if we could never cross the abyss, we should be irremediably solipsistic, autistic. To be human we must have both Same and Other together and in the right mixture, as in the *Timaeus*. Translation is the passage by understanding, or *in* the understanding, across the various kinds and degrees of linguistic difference that there are between and among us.

Our attitude towards making the passage is always ambivalent, because Otherness always has a double quality. On the one hand, Otherness is, as we say, “exotic,” a quality that fascinates us, attracts us, promises escape from self, from loneliness or boredom, a distraction. But it is also strange, repulsive, frightening, unfamiliar, threatening, destructive, and deadly boring. This is to say that one needs curiosity, imagination, understanding, and courage to go “over there.”

### TRANSLATION AS A LIBERAL ART

Translating is an art, *techne*, a doing, that produces something. Ordinarily it is a *useful* art. Certainly it has always been practiced on linguistic frontiers where neighbors and traders learn one another’s language for useful purposes—as on our borders Texans speak Mexican Spanish and Mexicans Texas English. In our school system (and consequently) in our own felt attitudes about the study of foreign languages) the American principle that school studies ought to be useful dominates increasingly. (One of the chief benefits of Latin in high school curricula was that nobody ever insisted it was useful; now even athletics are promoted as useful.) As you know, beginning French or Spanish textbooks invariably try to motivate you with the thought that you might be lost in Paris or Madrid unable to speak a word. This pedagogically induced phobia tends residually to trouble our Language Tutorial. Shouldn’t/should we be getting something useful, like “*Bonjour!*” and “*Comment allez-vous?*”

The 1937 Prospectus of the St. John’s New Program contains this Delphic statement: “The Liberal Arts are discovered by taking the useful arts seriously.” One sees that in the myth of how Geometry arose out of the flooding Nile. Let us try to interpret it out for Language.

You are in Paris. You have met Pierre, who speaks no English, while you speak no useful French. (“*Le dessein en est pris; je pars chère Thérèse*” doesn’t help much.) But you have a handbook of useful phrases. Now you are about to start out for the Champs Élysées when you notice out the window that it looks like rain. You point, but Pierre thinks you’re pointing to the Eiffel Tower and smiles. You get your handbook and find in the English column “It looks like rain” opposite to “*Le temps est à la pluie.*” You say this to Pierre, who says, “Ah, oui!” and gets his raincoat. You experience complete linguistic satisfaction! You have communicated!

What happened there? You found an alleged equivalent for “It looks like rain” which, when uttered, had your desired result *in action*. Pierre understood exactly what you wanted him *to do* and acted accordingly. It couldn’t have gone better if he’d understood your English when you said “It looks like rain.” But how did he *understand* what you said to him? Did he understand what you *said*? Or *what you wanted him to do*?

If we look thoughtfully at the two sentences for a while, they seem less and less equivalent—indeed, they seem to be basically non-equivalent.

**“It looks like rain.”**

Statement about appearance

Subject vague, “it” meaning perhaps “the weather”

An implicit judgement (yours,)

“It looks like rain *to me*.”

You could be wrong. It may not rain.

**“La temps est a la pluie.”**

Statement about reality

Subject definite, “le temps,” which is only incidentally “the weather.”

No prediction, no futurity. No uncertainty. In the mode of present fact.

*Le temps est a la pluie*, whether it rains or not.

Further, “le temps” is not really what English means by “weather,” or at least it is only incidentally so. *Le temps* is heavy with metaphysical overtones. It is *time*, but not in the sense of “hour,” rather of *the age, the season, the occasion, the great movement of things*. It has nothing to do with that vague association of atmospheric phenomena we call “It” or “the weather.”

In French there is that formidable generic article, *Le temps*. It is a unique an all-embracing concept, quite unlike weather, which is at best a local phenomenon. Similarly too, *la pluie*. What does the generic article mean here? It seems somehow to be naming rain as one of the universal elements.

Suddenly, too, the English itself becomes problematic. “It looks *like* rain.” “Like” here is surely not the ordinary preposition; this usage would be completely unintelligible. Does it mean “as if it may rain”? Is rain in our idiom somehow *verbal*? In the French sentence *la pluie* is decidedly a noun. Does the French somehow suggest that Time has come around to Rain? In any case, *Time* does not *rain*, even if *weather* does—which I am not at all sure of.

It is not my intention to resolve these difficulties but only to point out the remarkable difference of quality in the statements themselves, as well as of the words, which, one-to-one, have no correspondence at all. What can we mean if we say, as the phrasebook implies, they are “equivalent,” that either *translates* the other?

The linguistic worlds of French and English must really be quite different. They don’t *say* things the same way because they don’t *see* things the same way. Further, if they are somehow equivalent, is it not clear also that they are not equivalent by virtue of some third thing that both are trying to say but falling short of, some ideal mental proposition, as if there were a *real* language behind them which each manages to translate imperfectly? It seems you must *go all the way into the French* to understand it, and then when you come back to English, you find there is no full equivalent. French and English cannot be *made* equivalent. So whatever translation is, it is not decoding. It is much more trying to find with knowledge, wit,

imagination and good luck the best approximation you can achieve in terms of what you're trying to bring back with you.

This is the kind of translation effort, greatly developed and in respect of more significant texts, which constitutes a liberal art. It is an art of the understanding, because it is not possible to arrive at meaning without considering diction.

But suppose someone makes the following argument, objecting to the uses of translation in education: "Look how it has turned out to be impossible to translate one simple little weather idiom. Consider your own intimate experiences with the translation—and with the untranslatability of "echeis moi epein, o Socrates arche didakton he arête?" or of "en arche hen ho logos." Then think, if this is so, how enormous must be the distortion of an infinitely more complex text such as the *Discourse on Method*, or *Madame Bovary*, or the *Iliad*, or Augustine's *Confessions*.

I think I should try to answer such a one by proposing that we do not understand the *words themselves*, but *through* the words; and that, although there will be loss in translation, sometimes considerable, even fatal, loss, nevertheless, if enough of the structure and relations of the original are preserved, and if the translator is fortunate in his selection of terms, we may penetrate through the words and grasp the meaning—though no doubt less luminously than by way of the original.

Now this suggestion may not be persuasive by itself. But experience also witnesses against the eristic argument—much experience. To turn Cervantes' argument against translation back on itself, we do, after all, *see* the figures of the tapestry, even from the back side, if indeed somewhat obscurely. Worlds of readers who have no Spanish have beheld the mighty figures of Don Quixote and Sancho from the back of the tapestry, and they have not understood.

We seem to have an antinomy— (Translation is obviously impossible.

(Translation is obviously possible.

But the antinomy is only apparent. It resolves thus: Perfect translation is impossible; imperfect translation is eminently possible. Proof: it exists. *Esse est posse*.

### THE ACT OF TRANSLATION: THE HERMENEUTIC VOYAGE

It appeared that physical distance is a natural metaphor for the metaphysical distance we perceive between each person and another. Our words recognize, guard, sometimes increase this distance, and sometimes they help us to traverse it. Any such passage must, in the nature of things, be a going and a return, like the voyage of Ulysses, or like that of Priam to Achilles in the XXIV *Iliad*. This journey is always taken under the auspices of Hermes, the god of translators. I shall try to describe that voyage and return across the metaphysical abyss between any same one and any other one.

It is a voyage of the soul, so I shall have to use psychological terms.

1. The setting out is an act of faith, of trust. We face a text we do not understand. Words on a page, maybe Greek words, French words, maybe strange, unintelligible English words, of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, James Joyce. They may make little or no sense to us. To go there, to cross the threshold, *we*

*must hold on faith that the words make sense.* This is a faith in the word of others-- of teachers who say we should read this, a faith in the tradition partly, and partly too another kind of instinctive belief that people who put words together intend them to make sense, rather like your conviction that the stranger on the street who addresses you in a tongue you don't know also makes sense, so that you try to understand and to help him. One deeply knows that words are meant to signify.

2. Then we must make the effort to cross the abyss. We use lexical, grammatical, musical, logical skills. We try whatever devices we can find. We may ask for help from someone else. But the hardest part of the thing is to keep our judgment suspended—to keep from imposing *our own* meanings on the text. If we do that instead of listening to the author's words, we don't get there; we only find ourselves back on our own side where we started. There are hundreds of ways this self-sabotage can happen. If we "know" that Athene is the goddess of wisdom, that god's don't squabble, that heroes don't weep, that horses don't talk, we never get across to Homer's world. If we "know" what Shakespeare *must* be saying, had to be saying, about love or kingship and won't listen to his words but rewrite them to fit our own preconceived idea, we won't get there.
3. Once across the threshold, one must walk around, look at everything, try to see the relations of all things to one another. How does the beginning relate to the end? What are the main parts, the principal terms? How do the internal parts refer to one another, qualify one another? If we dwell there long enough, we may see it whole. Or almost whole. We'll see something, at least, of what it means. We shall have gone through the words by way of the words.
4. Then one must try to make it his own, to assimilate it, to translate it the other way, to carry it back across. Perhaps to get it into English, but at least to get it here and now, to bring it home and see what it's worth in this receptacle.
5. When you get back, you find it has become you and you have become it. Translation becomes conversion; *to carry across* is *to change and be changed*. Journey and metamorphosis; but by whom, from where and where, out of what into what?

What you discover is that translation is reciprocal. The "there and back" of the metaphor means that in reading you have translated the text and the text has translated you. It is because the thing known becomes you insofar as you know it. Other is assimilated—made to be Same. This, I think, is the ultimate nature of the crossing. Therefore, because understanding is translation and translation is an art, liberal translation is the art of the understanding itself, that is to say, a Liberal Art.

## THE LANGUAGE TUTORIAL

Let me now in conclusion address the St. John's Language Tutorial itself. What *is* supposed to be going on there?

An initial observation to begin with. The tutorial addresses a practical datum determined by the American educational system. For at least half a century the preparation of American college students in languages, ancient or modern, and for that matter, foreign or English, has been highly unpredictable. The only feasible approach for us is to begin somehow at the beginning.

It has never seriously been considered what we would do if all freshmen were relatively and uniformly competent in English, or Latin, or French, or Greek or some combination of these or others. Many things would be different, no doubt, but this is an idle speculation. I think there is no claim that what we practice is an *ideal* liberal program of language studies.

I hope too that our practices imply no ridiculous derogation of teaching or learning foreign languages fluently, expertly. It is not a thing we can either require or achieve within the range of our possibilities; we can move, perhaps haltingly, towards our goal without it. There should be no confusion about this. We do not wish to teach language badly.

The Language Tutorial is an integral and essential part of the curriculum. It is often said that the Seminar is the central supporting pole of the curriculum. This may be true, but the pole would fall if it were not guyed up by the Language Tutorial. Without the Tutorial there would be no slow, careful reading of texts other than mathematical ones, which are of course very special. One essential goal of the Language Tutorial is to permit extended dwelling with a text and to impart and develop the techniques that make such extended consideration first possible, then rewarding. It is, perhaps, the unique opportunity to know some work intimately, to see it, at least provisionally, as a whole. And the Language Tutorial is the only place where approximate techniques for reading different *kinds* of texts can be learnt and explored—I mean, philosophical exposition, philosophical dialogue, drama, lyric. Or where the nature of language itself can be explored upon occasion.

The Seminar has other goals than these and other methods. It can do none of these necessary things. The techniques of the Language Tutorial should assist the Seminar and *vice versa*. One way the Tutorial should help is by imparting a fairly sophisticated sense for the translations one reads. After four years of tutorial discipline a student should recognize the expedients to which translators resort and know how to make due allowance. He should see, for example, when some confusion results from translating one form in the original by several different words or phrases in English; or that the translator is making paraphrastic adjustments; or that an inconsistency of view or lack of sympathy is producing detectable distortions, as with Jowett's Christianizing of Plato. Such training, furthermore, should enable a student to use the original text intelligently and to ask intelligent questions when he seeks help with an unfamiliar language.

This is a kind of limited and academic result, though not a trivial one. A far more important accomplishment should be that the discipline of these four years should have imparted the techniques of paying attention to words, of pondering

their meanings, of trying to get across the abyss. A St. John's student should have become a translator in the larger sense.

To our students particularly it should be said that this is not usual in American schools, where, except in law schools, close reading is not much practiced. Speed-reading, quantity, superficiality are often fostered, indeed demanded—not in so many words, but *de facto*. I do not wish to make easy or cheap reference to support a serious point, but one must observe and draw some inference about the quality of our public language. No one who has the habit of attending to words could speak and write the way our public officials speak and write. Attending to words is as unusual as listening to voices.

I conclude by returning to the subject of tradition. I have said that *tradition* literally means the *handing on* of books, as of the Bible in the investiture of Christian bishops. But to hand on books in any meaningful sense, one must also hand on the arts of reading them.

Now arts are not contained in books, and cannot be acquired by reading alone. Arts of whatever sort, horsemanship, music, painting, shipbuilding, reading or writing or speaking, are and always have been passed on by a practicing tradition, not by books alone, the current publishers' spate of teach-yourself-books notwithstanding. To imagine that one could transmit an intellectual tradition by passing on books alone would be like imagining that a musical tradition could be inherited through instruments and scores.

I mean to suggest that the proper business of our Language Tutorials is to pass on the *arts* of reading, that is to say, of interpretation or translation. It is a rarer skill and a greater gift than is commonly recognized. I say this in awareness and acknowledgement of my personal debt to the many extraordinarily fine readers on the Faculty of the College from whom I have learned. For in the end, as I have said, it is not only the books, but we, who are translated—by “winged words,” as Homer has it. We go “there” and “back again,” bringing what we can gain.

One thinks of Odysseus, who proves to be the great figure of so much human experience. In my context he turns out to be the great voyager, and therefore the great translator—who having crossed utter distances came back with words and wisdom. When you translate yourself into a book, like him you have to come back again, for one cannot *live* in books. We read books not to be bookish but to live and act wisely.

*Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage,  
Ou comme cestuy-la qui conquist la toison,  
Et puis est retourné, plein d'usage et raison,  
Vivre entre ses parents, le reste de son âge!*

*Happy he who like Ulysses makes fair voyage,  
Or like that one whose sailing gained the Golden Fleece,  
And then returns, made rich by wisdom and by usage,  
Fulfilled in age, to share once more familiar peace.*