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Why Translation in Iowa

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INTRODUCTION

Why Translation in Iowa / Paul and Hualing Nieh Engle

Each year writers fly into Iowa City from the sharp corners of the round world. They make a community of the literary imagination in the International Writing Program. They bring their books in many languages and their lives with many memories of landscapes and people very strange to the midwest University of Iowa campus.

The Bengali remembers the dark bodies on the black streets of Calcutta; the Japanese woman remembers Tokyo nightclubs where she read her poems with jazz; the Kenyan remembers lions on the lion-yellow plains; the Breton poet remembers Carnac's megalithic stone monuments made before history; the Nigerian remembers the carved masks with their open mouths; the Peruvian remembers the ancient Quechuan Indian language still crying down from mountains to defy the Spanish; the Romanian remembers Transylvania's haunted peaks and valleys and the Danube's final flood before the Black Sea; the Balinese remembers the Ramayana performance where on the beautiful brown girls even the individual fingers dance; the Bombay Marathi remembers the great harbor where tall god Krishna on Elephanta Island and the tower of the atomic research institute (those two eternal sources of primal energy) glare at each other across the heat-glittering water.

In Iowa City they write their books in their own languages (they are not young students, but older, and widely published in their countries), talk with each other, speaking in many tongues. They find that unintelligible sounds made by a person from another side of the world are really expressing the same ideas and emotions as their own language. They find that translation is another tongue.

Some will argue that translation is impossible, that it gives only a lifeless shadow of the original poem, play, fiction. We believe that translation can make blood flow through that shadow and make its mouth speak. We believe this because here we have *writers translating writers*, not linguists translating language. We believe that translators into English must practice the art of poetry or prose creatively in English before attempting to recreate the imaginative text from another language. Skilled knowledge of the variety and power of English is quite as important as an expert knowledge of the other language. Without such skill, the original language will not find a new and transformed life in English. We do not assert that this has always been achieved in these pages which follow, but we have tried

at a level only a little below the effort of the person who first wrote in Chinese, Indonesian, Hungarian, Slovenian, Polish, Spanish and the rest.

Some of these translations were made by "co-translation," in which a gifted young American from the Writers Workshop was put to work with a foreign writer. His job was to keep the English fluent, lively, idiomatic, and that itself is a tough job.

Translation is a part of the world's survival. People translating each other are not killing each other, unless the person whose text is being translated is unbearably outraged at the result and draws a handgun on the translator. But surely this is justifiable homicide.

Some of the poetry and prose included was written immediately in English. Idea, emotion, cultural attitude were, in a sense, translated in the head of the writer, who carried them over from his childhood language to the language in which he was educated. The great example of course is Joseph Conrad, writing not in his native Polish, but in the words and grammar of English, which he learned later in life. In some countries, English is the one way in which different regions may talk to each other. This is also a fact of history which writers in the late twentieth century accept and use.

The International Writing Program believes that the human race, in all its colors and languages, is a single group of people, trying to keep its precarious grip on a lurching earth. It also believes that all the literatures of the world, in spite of their many-sounding languages, make one literature, for they all come from the same old imaginative expression of the gut-with-mind. The emotional concept of "mother" is the same whether a person says Chinese *ma* or German *Mutter* or French *mère*. It is the same cry.