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## Foreword

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## FOREWORD

In an older theology, “translation” meant the instant flight of the body to heaven without the nuisance of death.

We have met few returnees from this most marvelous of all trips.

Today, the removal of the body of a literary text from one language to another can still be a marvelous trip. Alas, too often the body reaches its new destination moribund, if not really dead. Translating is not merely a useful way to find out in general what words in one speech seem to mean in another. It is a great, imaginative and necessary art, all too little valued or admired.

Translation has often changed the world’s history as much by its brilliance as wars have changed it by their brutality. It was an incredible intellectual triumph to convert Buddhist texts from the polysyllabic original Sanskrit and Pali to the monosyllabic Chinese. It converted hundreds of millions in China and later in Japan. All across Asia, as a result, we are comforted and exalted by those carved Buddha faces assuring us that human life can indeed be serene and beautiful in the middle of turbulence and horror. Without the meaning of the translated texts, that sculpture would not strengthen us. The eyes of Buddha tell us, “Translate, translate.”

Perhaps the most massive of all translations has been that book called in English the Holy Bible. There must surely be no language which does not have its own version. The King James translation (done by a committee!) is one of the glories of the English language, an ornament equal to poetry of the same century written originally in its own language.

Consider the worldwide impact of Karl Marx through the myriad translations out of that massive German prose.

Before oil can be bought or sold, someone has to know the word for it in the working language of business. In the late twentieth century, translation is like bread—it is better not to try getting along without it.

Most of the texts in *Writing from the World II* were written in other languages, many of them little known in the USA. Some were first created in English, but the writers tell us that a form of translation went on in their heads before they converted their subject matter, their images, their dialogue into our tongue. One of the rich rewards of hearing languages from every part of the world spoken at the Interna-

tional Writing Program is the discovery that what sounds totally incomprehensible, even, by its tone, hostile, turns out simply to mean, "I miss my wife (or husband)," "I like hamburgers, everything on," "I missed my plane in Jakarta." Or the discovery that lyrical Romanian lines flowing with the dark power of the Danube near which they were written merge into such English as moves us along the Mississippi:

Just like your wife, your lover,  
who goes to sleep on your arm, which goes numb,  
but you don't move your arm,  
even if it breaks from your body.

*Nicolae Breban*

Once the ear converts the words, our nerves are alike under our various skins. We shudder as the poet shook with his primal emotion. Translation heightens language just as language itself heightens life.

As this world shrinks together like an aging orange and all peoples in all cultures move closer together (however reluctantly and suspiciously) it may be that the crucial sentence for our remaining years on earth may be very simply:

TRANSLATE OR DIE.

The lives of every creature on the earth may one day depend on the instant and accurate translation of one word.