

## THINK TANK

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# Translate This: 'A Man, a Plan, a Canal, Panama!' Or Was It Paraguay?

In describing his craft, the translator John Ciardi said that practitioners could try for "no more than the best possible failure." Yet scholarly translators have split over how to achieve even that modest goal.

On one side are the traditionalists who believe that translators should try to produce what's known as "transparent" translations. Translators, says Clifford Landers, president of the literary division of the American Translators Association and a translator of Portuguese literature, should strive to "recreate the same emotional and psychological effect that someone in the source language would have had in reading the original."

Their opponents argue that this method amounts to a kind of cultural imperialism, eliminating essential linguistic and cultural differences. "The ideal in translation," said Lawrence Venuti, a professor of English at Temple University who is on the judging panel for a translation prize awarded by the Modern Language Association, is "where the reader comes away with the experience of reading a foreign text, not only in the sense of themes that are foreign, but also at the level of the sentence." In other words, readers shouldn't be fooled into feeling too comfortable and at home with what is, after all, an alien world.

Yet the trouble with such translations, traditionalists argue, is that few people will want to read them. "The problem with the dense and difficult school is it ends up being something for the elitist," said Lynn Hoggard, president of the American Literary Translators Association and a professor of French at Midwestern State University. "A lot of people don't want to read something that constantly reminds them of its foreignness."

And getting people to read a work is the point, say the traditionalists. As it is, translation is a tough sell in the United States. Fewer than 2,000 works of translated literature are published here each year, or 2 to 4 percent of all published books.

Readers, they say, will have the easiest time understanding a work if it uses terms and ideas familiar to them in standard, modern English. This inevitably means that important literature should be translated again and again for each new generation, so that it reflects the changes in the language over time. (And it has the added benefit of guaranteeing a steady stream of work for translators.)

But critics like Mr. Venuti argue that the translator should search for the words and ideas that most closely resemble those in the source text. He uses his own translation of a Gothic horror story by the 19th-

century Italian author *inigo* Ugo Tarchetti as an example. "I decided this was a writer who wrote in the late Gothic period," he said. "It was important for me to signal the foreignness of this text that included archaisms and to mix those with current standard English."

So Mr. Venuti made lists of words used

in works by Poe, Shelley and Stoker because he felt these were the authors in English whose work most closely resembled Tarchetti's. Then he used them in his translation.

Of course, no translation can ever perfectly reflect the original because of grammatical, linguistic and cultural differ-

ences. And in some cases, as with slang, idioms, puns and wordplay, no equivalent word or phrase can capture the exact meaning either. In his book, "Le Ton Beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language," Douglas Hofstadter points out that it would be impossible to construct a palindrome in another language that would convey the exact same meaning as "A man, a plan, a canal, Panama!"

A translator's linguistic struggles extend far beyond dictionary definitions, however. Mr. Hofstadter goes on to argue that every word is surrounded by a halo of connotations and associations that radiate far beyond their literal meanings.

And since all words carry meanings and suggestions in one culture that don't necessarily have an exact counterpart in another, it is inevitable that translations will end up with colors, tones and meanings that don't exist in the original.

Which is why both the traditionalists and their critics agree that translators ultimately determine how their readers perceive another culture's literature. As even Mr. Venuti concedes: "Translators are essentially interpreting a foreign text, overlaying the text with another set of meanings. To practice translation and think you're not doing that is a misunderstanding of translation."



Naam Kazdan/Eye New York Times