It was the seventeenth-century French critic Gilles Ménage who coined the term les belles infidèles (the beautiful, unfaithful ones), after a venerably sexist French adage likening translations to women, in that they can be comely or faithful but never both. Ménage’s quip referred to the reigning tendency in French-language translation at the time, as exemplified by the translator Nicolas Perrot d’Ablancourt, to “update” the ancient Greek and Latin texts—that is, to remove vulgar language or sexual references, as well as to transpose things like currency and honorifics into their modern French counterparts—in order to fit prevailing standards of easy comprehensibility and bon ton. The translations were “beautiful,” in that they read smoothly and flattered consumer expectations, but faithful in the strict sense they were not. The fact that this tendency was sufficiently widespread and long-lasting to be known ever after as the “belles infidèles approach” does not mean that it was an especially notable phenomenon; indeed, the terms of the debate between beauty and fidelity remain more or less as they were when it began, some two thousand years ago.

One reason for this longevity is that no one has been able to define, once and for all, exactly what fidelity means in the
context of translation. John Dryden grumbled that the original author “can turn and vary [his thoughts] as he pleases, till he renders them harmonious; but the wretched translator has no such privilege [and] must make what music he can in the expression.” The scholar Michael Hanne takes a more positive view, arguing that “only a beautiful translation can be truly faithful to a fine original.” Edith Grossman cautions that “fidelity should never be confused with literalness.” Umberto Eco, as an author, considered the translation faithful when “the English text says exactly what I wanted to say,” regardless of whether it diverges from the Italian. And, according to Grossman, Borges went even further, recommending that all the polysyllabic words in his Spanish original be replaced in translation by good, sharp, Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: “Simplify me,” he prescribed. “Make me stark. My language oftenembarrasses me. It’s too youthful, too Latinate. ... Make me macho and gaucho and skinny.”¹

What the concordant but inconclusive nature of these prescriptions suggests above all is that the ways in which they can be enacted change with the circumstances, and that there are no definitive answers. Texts are read for many reasons, and one is “faithful” to different originals via different paths. You might successfully convey the atmosphere of a haiku or the humor of a comic strip by playing fast and loose, but as Bible translation in the Renaissance demonstrated, not striking the right balance between style and accuracy can sometimes get you burnt well-burnt at the stake.

Proponents of literalism argue that a benefit of preserving the foreignness of the foreign and bringing the reader to the author is that you move readers out of their familiar space and into somewhere new (though one could argue that all good literature does this, regardless of origin). Taking this to extremes
leaves one with something akin to Mark Twain’s parodic back-translation from the French of one of his own stories: “It there was one time here an individual known under the name of Jim Smiley ...” Less radically, it entails preserving specific cultural references that remind the reader of the work’s alien status. An old French ad for Menier chocolate shows a child scrawling the words *Evitez les contrefaçons*, which we could translate either as *Avoid imitations*, or else as the more familiar *Accept no substitutes*. One translation gives us a glimpse of how the French think, the other “moves the text toward the reader” by phrasing it the way the same ad in English might phrase it. Which is the more faithful?

Similarly, the translator Lawrence Venuti criticizes William Weaver, in his 1968 translation of Italo Calvino’s *Cosmicomics*, for replacing the original *tagliatelle* with *noodles*, arguing that the specificity and Italianness of *tagliatelle* gives the work a particular character that is erased in English. But we could just as easily defend Weaver for using a term that was familiar to his American readers in the same way that *tagliatelle* was to Italians, thereby maintaining the effect of the text and not forcing Anglophones to puzzle over something that Italians would have taken for granted. Moreover, language and usage change: *tagliatelle*, presumably considered too exotic fifty years ago, is now commonly recognized here.

Needless to say, a solid understanding of and sympathy with the source culture and language is key—otherwise, you might end up completely mistaking the connotations of *tagliatelle*, or, to borrow an illustration from Nabokov, translating the phrase *bien-être général* not as *overall well-being* but as the howler *it’s good to be a general*. The translator Judson Rosengrant argues that “fine translation” is “both scholarship and art, each reinforcing
the other,” which is a fine ideal. At the same time, solid understanding does not in itself guarantee a felicitous translation, and sometimes can stand in its way by making every available option seem hopelessly inadequate.

Even more than the ability to seize every nuance of the source, I would argue that the single most crucial requirement in producing a viable target version is to be a talented writer in one’s own language. We could fill barrels (to be then rolled off cliffs) with scholars who can identify every hue and shade of a foreign text, yet lack the stylistic facility in their own to re-create these subtleties. “All the worst translations are done by experts in the foreign language who know little or nothing about the poetry alongside which their translations will be read,” protests Eliot Weinberger. “Foreign-language academics are largely concerned with semantical accuracy, rendering supposedly exact meanings into a frequently colorless or awkward version of the translation language.” It’s not only about scholarly equivalences, it’s also about linguistic ambiance. Though a number of translators have chosen to live abroad, for me it seems essential to be surrounded by my target language, the better to stay current with the changing colors and tonalities of its usage. Asked if his Spanish was good enough to translate García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gregory Rabassa shrewdly replied that the real question was whether his *English* was good enough.4

If translation is assumed to be in the service of the source text, a hunt for elusive equivalences, then it is doomed to be judged negatively—at best, to paraphrase Beckett, by how well it fails. But once we see the translation as a creative work in its own right, one that conveys the essence, spirit, and, to the extent possible, form of someone else’s text while communicating a literary pleasure all its own, then it becomes less an impossible pursuit and
more (to borrow Ralph Manheim’s formulation) a performance to be appraised on its own merits. Rather than equivalence, or the other terms commonly employed—re-creation, identity, analogy, match—I would use the word representation. A good translation offers not a reproduction of the work but an interpretation, a re-presentation, just as the performance of a play or a sonata is a representation of the script or the score, one among many possible representations. I think of it as analogous to a good cover version of a favorite song, one that might not sound like the original but that finds the essence of the song and re-creates it differently; that makes the listener hear the song in a way that both preserves and renews it. Moreover, I would take issue with Franz Rosenzweig’s well-known definition of the translator’s lot as “to serve two masters,” the foreign work and the target reader. Translators have a distinct responsibility toward the text and toward the reader, but they do not serve. Rather, they create something new, something that does not diminish the original work but rather adds something of value to the sum total of global literatures.

The question, as always, is whether the text produces the desired effect, to which the answer is, ultimately, subjective: a translator must first interpret the original, see what effect it has on her, and then try to represent that effect in a language and culture not the author’s own. Whether that original will have the same effect on other readers is anyone’s guess. Whether each subsequent reading will always have the same effect even on the translator is indeterminate. But to the best of their abilities and judgment, good translators produce versions that re-create the complex web of responses that they as readers have had to the source text, versions that will establish a setting liable to elicit those responses in others.
As we have seen time and again, *faithful* is an endlessly debatable term, so malleable and polyvalent as to finally become meaningless. A translation has to represent the original in a way that allows a target reader to experience as much as possible the spirit and purpose and pleasure (or distaste) and vigor (or indolence) of the work on which it’s based. It has to speak to the reader in a way that justifies the original’s claim of being worthy of translation to begin with. It has to be *convincing*.

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Although literary translation might not bear the immediate repercussions of, say, the simultaneous interpretation of a UN policy address or a bilingual medical consult, it nonetheless entails certain issues that carry deep political and ethical implications. Dating back at least as far as the Romans and their appropriation of Greek oratory, these issues remain no less relevant to our contemporary concerns with cultural hegemony and empowerment.

What is the translator’s responsibility, and how best to actualize it? The answer boils down to two not-so-simple words: *respect* and *empathy*. Respect for the work one is translating, for the place—in both the geographical and psychological sense—from which it comes, as well as for one’s own labor as a translator and for the reader who will eventually consume the fruits of that labor. Empathy for the intent behind the written artifact. Constance Garnett asserted that a translator’s primary qualifications were “to be in sympathy with the author he is translating” and “to be in love with words” and all their meanings: “The language of a country is the soul of the people, and if you debase the language you debase the people and rob them of their heritage.”

This does not mean setting aside our judgment or ability to intervene. We want to do right by our authors, dead or alive,
and sometimes that means using our attunement to the text to know when to keep aspects of it from interfering with the reading experience. Respect should never tip into awe, for then it becomes paralyzing. “Just as writing is an act of hubris,” writes the translator Burton Raffel, “so too is good translation. The translator cannot afford to be any more modest than the original author was.” The wages of too much respect are mediocrity.

That said, and as history has repeatedly shown, it is possible, even in the name of that respect, to enlist translation as a foot soldier in imperial campaigns of cultural expansion. Saint Jerome, the early proponent of liberalism in translation, nonetheless believed that “the translator considers thought content a prisoner which he transplants into his own language with the prerogative of a conqueror.” Even now, when we acknowledge Shakespeare’s debt to Golding’s Ovid, or Keats’s to Chapman’s Homer, or George Bernard Shaw’s (or Katherine Mansfield’s, or Raymond Carver’s) to Garnett’s Chekhov, we may intend to honor the original, but we’re really emphasizing its benefit to our language.

To some extent one is tempted to say, with a Gallic shrug, *et alors*? There’s nothing inherently wrong with diversifying one’s culture—indeed, as Goethe and Schleiermacher recognized, without such dynamic interchanges, languages wither and die (which is why the normalizing efforts of bodies such as the Académie Française seem so vain). Moreover, to the degree that it promotes cross-cultural understanding, translation can help make the alien Other less alien, help advance useful dialogue rather than the border-caulking discourse of hidebound protectionists. Susan Sontag astutely remarked that translation is by nature “an ethical task, and one that mirrors and duplicates the role of literature itself, which is to extend our sympathies ... to
secure and deepen the awareness (with all its consequences) that other people, people different from us, really do exist.”

As to how those different people become aware of other cultures, it largely depends on where one stands in the linguistic food chain. Translation theorists speak of “vertical” and “horizontal” translation. The first designates translations from a “major” source into a “minor” or “vernacular” target (such as, today, Spanish into Catalan, or, in medieval times, Latin into pretty much anything); the second, translations between two languages of equal prominence. It is especially vertical translation that is at issue in cases of cultural enhancement, such as the Romans borrowing from the Greeks, the French taking from the Italians in the Renaissance, or the Germans amassing “all the treasures of foreign art and scholarship” in Schleiermacher’s nineteenth-century scenario (see chapter 3). Paving more of a two-way street, David Bellos speaks of translations “up” or “down,” the former taking place when, say, the Icelandic Nobel laureate Halldor Laxness is picked up by Random House; the latter when the Icelandic publisher Bjartur takes on Harry Potter. Again, there seems nothing inherently wrong with this, and examples abound of authors (including several listed at the beginning of this book) writing in less frequented languages who have reaped intellectual and financial rewards and attained international prominence from being translated “up,” having their works thrust into global languages and markets.

But probing deeper, we find a more sinister side to the process. As the translation scholar Emily Apter notes, translation, while facilitating exchange, can simultaneously act as an “agent of language extinction,” condemning “minority tongues to obsolescence, even as it fosters access to the cultural heritage of ‘small’ literatures.” In other words, in a kind of “damned if you
do, damned if you don’t” quandary, the more that languages like English, Russian, or Chinese gain market share, partly through absorbing the productions of minority cultures like so many corporate acquisitions, the more these minority productions are threatened with irrelevance, forced to push their way onto the world stage via translation (which ultimately redefines and reshapes them) or else fall off the grid entirely. One need only think of the Celtic languages and the honorable though perhaps futile attempts to preserve them. Increasingly, the literature and folklore of such languages live on only through translation into mainstream tongues, while the original versions slowly die out or, as with Sanskrit, become the exclusive province of the erudite. It’s a curious paradox, one that highlights the ability of translation not only to unite but also to appropriate. Translation becomes both the bridge linking civilizations and a measure—even an aggravator—of the gulf separating them.

What, you might ask, does all this have to do with the process of ferrying a work between linguistic shores? The answer is that our ever more interconnected societies demand unprecedented attention to the benefits of, and the ethical challenges raised by, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication. “In a world where individual nation-states are increasingly enmeshed in financial and information networks, where multiple linguistic and national identities can inhabit a single state’s borders or exceed them in vast diasporas, where globalization has its serious—and often violent—discontents, and where terrorism and war transform distrust into destruction, language and translation play central, if often unacknowledged, roles,” writes Sandra Bermann. Otherwise put, translation has become too serious a business to be left to dusty pedants and poets pondering their Chapman.
In response to this quandary and its global implications, current generations of academic theorists have revived the Punic War between fidelity and felicity in a meaner, harsher, more politicized form. For many of these theorists, translation into major Western languages constitutes an act of aggression against the language and culture being translated. Indeed, some theories give rise to the curious phenomenon of the self-hating translator, an odd hybrid who bemoans the fact that his labors aren’t sufficiently appreciated yet despises his inescapable role in promoting the marginalization of other cultures. “Reading late twentieth- or twenty-first-century translation theory,” quips the (practicing) translator Peter Cole, “one often gets the sense that many of the principal theorists simply resent the imagination, if not the English language itself.”

Some of these academics champion “foreignizing” translations that intentionally flout the conventions of the target language to retain those of the source. Taking his cue from the French theorist Antoine Berman, the translator and professor Lawrence Venuti, one of the more outspoken advocates of this method, attacks the notion of fluency in translation as “a discursive sleight of hand” that imposes on the work such “English-language” values as “easy readability, transparent discourse, and the illusion of authorial presence.” In Venuti’s telling, the literary translator comes off as a kind of CIA wet boy, perpetrating a terrorist act whose “violence … resides in the very purpose and activity of translation: the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist it in the target language … [which constitutes] an appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas.” In his book *The Translator’s Invisibility*, he argues for an approach that accentuates the strangeness of the foreign text in its very
translation, doing “right abroad” by doing “wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience.”

Venuti’s basic point is that translation must not be used to homogenize other cultural viewpoints, and that the “illusion of transparency” resulting from current practice obscures the culturally weighted contribution of the translator. To some extent, this critique is fair enough: there is something queasy-making about having to pledge allegiance to a language or culture that aggressively asserts its will to primacy, its desire to exclude those who won’t get with the lingo; and many translators (myself included) do seek to create a reader-friendly experience in the target language. But as with many polemics, Venuti’s wilts under its own heat. Of course translation is a product of interpretative choices conditioned by the translator’s home culture. The problem, however, lies not with fluid or intelligible translations per se, but rather with ones that actively pretend they aren’t translations at all, or that make changes dictated solely and arbitrarily by the translator’s (or publisher’s, or audience’s) own biases when these are at odds with what the author wrote. Besides, the foreignness of the source text resides not only in its syntax but also in the concerns, viewpoints, settings, and context that its author puts forth, their nonnative character shining almost inevitably through the target version as if through a translucent cloth. Something of the original always seeps into the translation, whether the author’s native sensibility, trace elements of the source syntax, or the way the source language helps structure the author’s world-view. No matter how fluid in English, would anyone mistake Kafka, or Kundera, for an American writer? There is a large middle ground between “naturalizing” a work so drastically that it becomes denatured and preserving its
foreign flavor to the point of serving up gibberish. Imagining the sort of translation Venuti seems to favor, one can’t help recalling the *New Yorker* cartoon in which a visibly woebegone translator asks his seething author, “Do you not be happy with me as the translator of the books of you?” (The irony is that Venuti’s own translations tend to read with at least reasonable fluency, further pointing to the academic gap between theory and practice.)

Let’s be clear: I am not advocating that a translation “normalize” or try to ignore the foreignness of the source text. I’m merely observing that a little foreignization can go a very long way. Ralph Parker, the English translator of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, added a short but potent four-letter word to English by adapting the author's Russian term for the camp inmates into the highly evocative *zeks*, much as Anthony Burgess reverse-engineered Russian words—*khorosho* (“good”) into *horrorshow*—to pepper his droogs’ patois in *A Clockwork Orange* and give the book its particular sound. Touches such as these—grace notes rather than full-on crescendos—allow us to appreciate what’s foreign about the inspiration without forcing us into an unnecessarily alienating and off-putting reading experience. Moreover, as Bellos notes, the deployment of strange-sounding phrases or syntax to convey the text’s nonnative origins is ultimately self-defeating, as such translations will simply be “disregarded as clumsy, awkward, or incomplete,” or else, as in the case of *tagliatelle*, what was once a foreignism will simply become part of the target language, no longer foreignizing at all.¹³

To this I would add, as a strategic matter, that in a cultural climate already dismissive of foreign outlooks and literatures, intentionally making them even harder to access seems a classic case of shooting oneself in the foot with a howitzer. As Edith
Grossman points out, “A mindless, literalist translation would constitute a serious breach of contract. There isn’t a self-respecting publisher in the world who would not reject a manuscript framed in this way.” Despite what Venuti asserts, a good translator aims not to promote some illusory invisibility but rather to infuse the text with an appropriate amount of his own personality, gauged on a case-by-case, instance-by-instance basis: enough to give the translation distinction without smothering the original.

It’s true that history is filled with examples of translators who have brought their cultural prejudices heavily to bear, as evidenced by the belles infidèles. Sometimes the work has suffered for it, as when in the eighteenth century Alexander Tytler (the same Tytler who prescribed a “complete transcript of the ideas of the original”) expunged all references to physicality from Homer because they offended “correct taste”; or when J. H. Frere, in the nineteenth century, discarded the “lines of extreme grossness” he found in Aristophanes. (And while we’re at it, let’s not lose sight of how our own prejudices continue to operate, such as in suppressing language now deemed politically incorrect.) But sometimes these prejudices have yielded idiosyncratic gems, such as the King James Bible, or Ezra Pound’s translations of Chinese, Classical, and Provençal poetry, or Edward FitzGerald’s Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám.

FitzGerald provides an illuminating example. Castigated by historians of translation for the wide detours he took in rendering the Persian poems of the Rubáiyát, he further compounded his case with such culturally arrogant reflections as: “It is an amusement to me to take what Liberties I like with these Persians, who (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape
While I can’t endorse his viewpoint, I note that he nonetheless produced a translation of these poems that introduced them to, and still resonates with, a large reading public, whereas later, more culturally sensitive versions have fallen into oblivion.

Moreover, FitzGerald’s pronouncement sounds less smug when set alongside another of his credos: “To keep Life in the Work (as Drama must) the Translator (however inferior to his Original) must re-cast that original into his own Likeness, more or less: the less like his original, so much the worse: but still, the live Dog better than the dead Lion.” In other words, and yet again, a translation endowed with the breath of life should be considered an independent creation, to be read on its own merits, rather than the pale shadow or exegesis of another work.

But the question remains: Does domestication into one’s own culture necessarily mean eradicating the otherness of the original? The examples I’ve just cited certainly bespeak a desire to boil the foreign text down into something more palatable to homegrown tastes. But I believe that one can make a literary work accessible in one’s own land while safeguarding its cultural differences. The aim, in other words, is not “to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar,” as Venuti would have it, but to bring back that otherness in ways that make it available to those who could not otherwise benefit. When I try to convey the fluidity and smoothness of Patrick Modiano’s French in equally fluid English, it’s his fluidity I’m seeking to represent, not some hypothetical fluidity of the English language as a whole. Nor does my English version obscure the fact that Modiano’s prose reflects a fundamentally non-American sensibility, or that his characters are interacting
with foreign settings in ways that an American, even an expatriate one, would not. To my mind, this otherness is a key element of Modiano’s work, and making it appreciable to American readers does not, should not, in any way negate it.

My goal, then, is to offer readers the best likeness of the work that I can, retaining the quirks and personality of the original, but also making sure my version affords literary enjoyment in English—even if that involves a certain creative license. This does not mean trampling heedlessly over the foreign author’s work, imposing my own preferences or shoehorning it into my culture’s values. At the same time, it also doesn’t mean bending and twisting the translation to fit the latest political fashions, or rigidly following a given theoretical approach. What it does mean is being sufficiently attuned to each nuance to divine where the author was going, and knowing when to follow closely and when to deviate a bit in order to arrive at the same destination. It means constantly interrogating the text, trying to get behind it and adapting when necessary.

On this score, different translators have found their comfort zone at different points along the spectrum. My usual position is to let the inherent foreignness of the author’s viewpoint seep through prose that, in other respects, is no stranger in English (but also no less strange) than it would be in French. But even then, it’s a tricky balance, often decided on a case-by-case basis, and by feel rather than hard-and-fast rule. I probably wouldn’t call a character named François “Frank,” but neither would I have him exclaim “Mon dieu!” as if in a bad Maurice Chevalier movie. Bellos takes matters a quarter step further by leaving certain terms (interjections, official titles, foodstuffs) in the original. On the flip side of the coin, the British translator of Frédéric Beigbeder’s novel 99 francs, in an update of the belles infidèles,
transposed the author’s trendy Parisian hotspots into more familiar London ones, and the title into the Brit-friendly £9.99 (the Spanish version, meanwhile, was called 13,99 euros: does the translation have to be retitled with each fluctuation in the exchange rate?). And these examples concern cultures that, all things considered, are fairly similar to each other. What of cultures that are radically dissimilar? Looking toward Middle Eastern and Asian literatures, the translator John Balcom wonders whether “even the most fluent translation” can be intelligible to Western readers “if the larger cultural context that generated the original work is not adequately understood.” In cases such as those, how does the translator convey the crucial background without adulterating the text or weighing it down unduly?

There is no one-size-fits-all answer: in the same work, one might encounter passages in which technical precision is paramount, others that underscore the music of the prose, and still others in which the comedy or pathos turns on a culture-specific reference. One sentence might require a scrupulous word-for-word tracing; another might benefit from a “stealth gloss,” the quiet little insertion that whispers a bit of critical intel to the reader; still another might need to be broken down and rebuilt from scratch. The outcome often rests on the translator’s abilities to recognize and confront each of these on its own terms—on having a sufficiently stocked tool kit and knowing how to use it.

Simply put, one’s primary responsibility as a translator—to the reader, to the foreign author, to the text one is translating, to the culture that engendered it, and to oneself as a committed, caring professional—is to create a new literary text to the best of one’s abilities and by whatever means appropriate. One that credibly represents the uniqueness of the source text, but also one that exudes as much life as the source text, and yields as
much pleasure. Otherwise, why should anyone feel compelled to read it?

In this regard, I would suggest that one of the biggest pitfalls for translators is to become so concerned with theoretical or political strictures that they neglect those moments of pure, intuitive brilliance that constitute the joys of literature. Call this approach middle-of-the-road, or call it the refusal of a system, of an overarching theory that would force the translator toward a given strategy at the expense of another that might fit the particular bill more closely. Borges put it aptly: “When I translate Faulkner, I don’t think about the problem of translating Faulkner.”

The bottom line is: every act is a political act, but a literary translation that “does wrong at home” will not remedy the world’s inequities. All it will do is create one more unreadable volume to sit untouched on our shelves—assuming it gets that far—and help ruin yet another foreign author’s chances of reaching a wider audience. It’s as plain as that.

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Any discussion of the ethics of translation necessarily includes the politics of publishing, and on this topic translators tend, for once, to be in dyspeptic consensus. While they may fight tooth and nail about methodology, with remarkably few exceptions they fall into lockstep on a set of basic complaints: that far too few translations are published in English (the frequently cited statistic is that, in the United States and United Kingdom combined, only about 2 to 3 percent of the books published each year are literary translations, though that figure has recently been revised up to about 5 percent—better, not great); that most editors are venal creatures who avoid translations because they’re perceived as poor sellers; that when editors do publish
translations, they tend to bowdlerize them and smooth out their difficulties to make them more marketable; that among published translations, a disproportionate number are from prominent Western languages, while the rest get short shrift; and so on.

As with any such charges, these contain their share of truth and exaggeration. It’s true that the main Western European languages, French and Spanish in particular, do still account for the lion’s share of English-language translations, though others have lately been coming up from behind; and that the Anglo-American publishing industry generally feels little need to gaze past its backyard: in contrast to our translation GDP of 5 percent, Western Europe and Latin America tend to translate at a rate of 20 to 40 percent. Taking the other tack, however, it is also true that a publisher’s business is not only to bring good books to the world but also to stay in business, since an unsuccessful list does neither the publishing house nor its authors much good.

Regardless of the above, there are editors who regularly publish translations, who combat the indifference or skepticism of their colleagues and the media and labor to win these books the attention they deserve. And, picking up the mantle of illustrious predecessors like Alfred and Blanche Knopf, Helen and Kurt Wolff, and James Laughlin, there are a number of small independent presses, such as Archipelago, New Directions, Europa, Deep Vellum, Open Letter, Two Lines, Wakefield, and Dalkey Archive, who even in this day and age manage to survive largely, or even exclusively, on a diet of literary translations. There is also AmazonCrossing, the Web retailer’s translation imprint, which is currently the most active publisher of literary translations in the United States.21
Nevertheless, the sad fact is that publishing translations is an uphill battle. The literary marketplace is as unpredictable as any other, and no one can really say why a Roberto Bolaño or Stieg Larsson, a Marguerite Duras or Umberto Eco (whose *Name of the Rose* reportedly made the rounds of New York publishers twice before Harcourt Brace picked it up), an Elena Ferrante or Karl Ove Knausgaard, breaks through and so many others don’t; or why the long shot suddenly takes off while the surefire bestseller flops; or why a book that took the rest of the world by storm fizzles here. There are theories: the poor quality of foreign-language instruction in schools; the lack of a homogenous culture in the United States, making us more interested in the culture of our assimilation than of our (or others’) heredity; the low profile of serious literature in general in this country and its lack of reach. But these are at best partial explanations, not really an answer to a question that, ultimately, might not have an answer. What makes publishing both thrilling and challenging is that you never know in advance, and a good editor will launch each project into the world with the same level of hope, energy, and conviction, regardless of original language—even though for every translation that hits the bestseller list, there are many others that never recoup their costs, let alone make a profit. As the man said, publishing is a great way to end up with a small fortune, provided you start with a large one.

Let’s consider the margins: if we take $15 as an average cover price for a translated novel in paperback, we can assume that about 50 percent of that will be scooped off the top in bookseller discounts (the average for most bookstores is 40 to 45 percent; Amazon, which accounts for many of these sales, charges as much as 55 percent), bringing the publisher’s share per copy down to about $7.50. From this, remove a distribution fee that can go as
high as 35 percent of net, or another $2.63, further reducing the share to $4.87. Assume a royalty, based on list price, of 8 percent to the foreign publisher ($1.20); that brings the publisher’s earnings to $3.67 a copy. Now, assume up-front costs of about $5,000 in manufacturing and shipping based on a first printing of two thousand copies for a book of about two hundred pages (no illustrations), plus a translation fee of $6,000 (based on forty thousand words at the average rate of $150 per thousand), and the simple math says that you’ll have to sell around 3,000 copies just to break even—more, in other words, than your entire first printing, and more, sadly, than most translations actually do sell. And this doesn’t take into account overhead costs, warehousing, inventory depreciation, any promotional outlay, and other “invisible” expenses associated with publishing a book, even minimally.

Which is why strategies like foreignization ultimately come off as pure academic twaddle. For someone like Lawrence Venuti—and he’s by no means alone—to plump for this approach as being “highly desirable today, a strategic intervention in the current state of world affairs” while simultaneously bemoaning the translator’s lot is simply perverse. Translations already suffer in this country from the assumption that their concerns, references, and form make them impenetrable to the American mind. They already run up against a prejudice that they are, by nature, financial sinkholes, only slightly tempered by the occasional success. Does anyone really believe that offering up even less approachable translations will help?

That’s from the publisher’s viewpoint. What about the translator’s? Everyone knows the low rates most translators earn for their work, sometimes in stark contrast to the large advances the bestselling source author might command. It’s true that
organizations such as PEN America have campaigned actively to improve contractual terms for professional translators, and that conditions today are, in the main, better than they once were. But fees are still rather low—normally between 13 and 20 cents per word for a literary translator in the United States (often rounded down if the book is long)—and royalties, if offered at all, rarely exceed 1 or 2 percent of net proceeds (meaning that most translators never see any money beyond the initial advance). Even when there are subsidies from governments wishing to promote the home culture abroad by making translations more affordable—the French have been particularly active in this regard—very often the money only makes mildly cost-effective what would have been ruinous before, and has little impact on the translator’s income. Tim Parks, one of translation’s most outspoken curmudgeons (in a field that seems to attract its fair share of them), recently advanced a controversial proposal for doing away with royalties altogether and adopting a payment scale based on the difficulty of the text, to be judged by a combination of editor, translator, and expert in the field—a nice idea in principle but a logistical nightmare and highly subjective to boot.  

Beyond questions of payment, but also related to publishing economics, there is another difficulty inherent in the translator’s task: whereas an author might spend years grappling with the mot juste, very often the translator, commissioned by an editor on a tight production schedule, has only a matter of months to wrestle with those same choices. The frequent combination of limited income and limited time in which to earn it threatens to undermine the translator’s personal investment in the project (and therefore the end result), and calls uncomfortably to mind Dryden’s causative association between the dearth of
translators with “all the Talents” and their “small Encouragement”—an association that no doubt finds plenty of echo in the dark basement of the translator’s soul, where the little voices whisper what society and literary history have always declared: that he’s a second-class citizen at best.

And what, finally, of the reviewers, whose job it is to inform, evaluate, and champion? Among the most frequently cited obstacles to winning a significant audience for translations is the ever-dwindling stockpile of visible reviews that would ignite interest in them—though perhaps websites such as GoodReads, Bookslut, Omnivoracious, and Three Percent can help turn that around. Judging anecdotally, there does seem to be slightly more review attention paid to translations at the moment than in the recent past—a slightly good thing—though many reviewers still display a certain reticence when dealing with foreign-born works. We can see it in the noncommittal adverbs they tend to favor when mentioning the translator’s efforts, if mention is made at all: smoothly, fluidly, elegantly, or that faintest of all faint praises, nicely. Often the discussion begs the question of whether the reviewer could or did read the original. Yes, there are some who delve into the particulars of the translation, sometimes

* They have their work cut out for them, judging by this statement from the former book-review editor of the Atlantic Monthly on how the magazine chooses titles for review: “We tend to focus on prose style in our assessment of fiction. It’s obviously far more difficult to do so when reviewing literature in translation, because both the reviewer and the reader of the book encounter not the author’s writing but the translator’s rendering of it. Hence we run fewer pieces on translated works” (Benjamin Schwarz, “Why We Review the Books We Do,” Atlantic Monthly, January/February 2004, accessed October 8, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/01/new-noteworthy/302874/). The outrage that greeted this statement appears to have had little effect on policy.
with acute perception, sometimes even with a degree of astigmatic pedantry that threatens to kill any enjoyment the text might offer. Most, on the other hand, simply take the English at face value. In either case, what the reviewer is ultimately judging is not the author’s text but the translator’s—a self-evident point that too easily gets lost in discussions of “the author’s” style, and that translators, and the entire enterprise of translation, would benefit from having made more explicit.

As both a translator and a publisher committed to translations, I’d be delighted to see more translations published, and to be offered more books to translate. But I also have to wonder whether many of the foreign works proposed for translation, including ones that do find their way into print, are frankly worth the effort. Granted, one man’s Manchet is another man’s Cheate bread, but as a reader I’m probably as close to the target demographic as any editor could wish, and even I find it hard to get excited about many of the offerings—so just try foisting them on your average Danielle Steele or Dan Brown fan (though arguably *The Da Vinci Code* wouldn’t exist without *The Name of the Rose*, English version). Moreover, many of the translations I hear about I discover by pure chance, even though I work in the industry and presumably have better access to the information than most. Which is why complaints about the crass mercantilism of publishers, or about hegemonic imperatives proscribing certain languages from translation, often have a whiff of the ivory tower about them. When it comes to suppressing foreign voices, political machinations can’t hold a candle to basic reader indifference or lack of information.

To continue playing devil’s advocate, I would add that many of the pro-translation panels and other boosting efforts, however well-intentioned, exacerbate the problem by implying that reading foreign literature is not so much a pleasure as a duty,
something good for you like medicine, and just as foul-tasting. There is an unpleasantly preachy tone to many arguments in favor of translation from “strange” cultures. “Little could be more relevant to the United States or to other nations in the contemporary world than the range of texts in need of translation,” writes Sandra Bermann. “More and better translations of non-English texts could, for instance, clearly help the Anglo-American reader to engage literary worlds and historical cultures that are not her own.” Yes, but who said the reader wants to engage? And what makes these texts that are purportedly “in need of translation” more relevant to even a reasonably cultured American than professional, personal, and financial concerns, or than the plethora of other cultural events vying for her attention? Similarly, Edith Grossman states flat out that “publishing houses in the United States and the United Kingdom have an ethical and cultural responsibility to foster literature in translation.” A responsibility to whom? Too often such admonitions fall on closed ears because of their distinct undertone of street-corner proselytizing, anathema even to sympathetic listeners, and because they fail to address the deeply ingrained streak of insularity in the American makeup. Because of this insularity, it is all too easy for the public at large, and the critical and publishing establishment in its wake, to dismiss non-English books, even beautifully translated ones, as “too foreign,” “too cold,” “too hot,” “too other,” or to ignore them altogether. Our nation was founded on an ideal of “self-reliance.” We are, as Andre Dubus III wrote, “isolated between two oceans and have friendly neighbors to the north and south and can afford the luxury of being provincial”—the luxury of believing that America, as the bombastic, blinkered slogan has it, “comes first.” Simply denying or decrying this fact won’t make it go away.25 And
before we condemn too shrilly the intellectual lethargy of John Q. Reading-Public, we translators and culturati would do well to heal ourselves. Some years ago, at an American Literary Translators Association colloquium, I asked how many in the audience had purchased a translated book in the past twelve months; a very small number of hands (2 to 3 percent, perhaps?) shot up.

I say all this not because I don’t believe in the power of translation—quite the opposite—but because I believe literary translation serves a purpose somewhat adjacent to the roles of cultural reeducation or global unity that we tend to assign to it. Translation is like any art: in the best of cases, it helps shed light on ourselves, on those hidden corners of ourselves that we barely knew existed, and whose discovery has enriched us. It exposes us to minds and voices able to awaken in us a particular sense of delight, an irreplaceable thrill of discovery that is available nowhere else. The ability of these minds and voices to do this is unique, not because they come from a foreign land—or at least, not solely because of it—but because they are sui generis, as exceptional in their own culture as they appear in ours. If literary translation is valuable in today’s world, it is because such minds and voices are exceedingly rare, and we cannot afford to be ignorant of a single one of them. And if publishers indeed ought to publish more translations, it is not because they are “good for us,” in that annoying, finger-wagging sense, but because such voices, in whatever language they have originally expressed themselves, are the reason that humans have hungered after stories since consciousness began.

That, at least, is the ideal. The reality is that publishing choices are often dictated not so much by the work’s intrinsic qualities, or by recommendations from translators or professors of foreign
literatures, or even by its commercial prospects, though all of those factor into them—no, what most often drives the choice is happenstance, availability: the fact that a certain rights manager at the Frankfurt Book Fair caught a certain editor’s attention with an author’s work, or that some nations actively promote their literatures abroad while others don’t, or that far more book editors in this country can read French or Spanish than, say, Estonian or Urdu. In other words, most editors, even well-disposed, are very often flying blind.

In order to help remedy this situation, to combat that insularity mentioned above, we need to start much further back than a publisher’s office. We need to start in homes and in schools, by nurturing in our children, and in ourselves, the attitude that foreign languages, foreign literatures, foreign viewpoints, matter. That they are not something to be kept to the other side of some mythical wall but welcomed into our homes and integrated into our daily lives. Because if this attitude does not become part of our thinking patterns and our buying habits, then it is only natural that fewer and fewer foreign books will be offered for sale, with the result that our exposure to these viewpoints will continue to diminish. And our cultural perspectives—our perspectives as human beings in the world—might well atrophy beyond repair.
Chapter 4


12. Quotes in this and the following paragraph from Venuti, *Translator’s Invisibility*, 78, 18, 20, 1.

13. Bellos, 58. See also 36.


.html; Chad W. Post, “By the Numbers—A Surge in Translations,” *Publishers Weekly: Frankfurt Show Daily*, October 20, 2016, 18–19. As reported by Post, between 2010, when the imprint started, and 2016, Amazon-Crossing published 237 original translations; the next highest output during that period was from Dalkey Archive, with 192 titles. See also Grossman, 28.


