

Fernando Pessoa

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I do not know whether anyone has ever written a History of Translation(s). It should be long, but a very interesting book. Like a History of Plagiarisms — another possible masterpiece which awaits an actual author — it would brim over with literary lessons. There is a reason why one thing should bring up the other: a translation is only a plagiarism in the author's name. A History of Parodies would complete the series, for a translation is a serious parody in another language. The mental processes involved in translating well are the same as those involved in translating competently. In both cases there is an adaptation to the spirit of the author for a purpose which the author did not have; in one case the purpose is humour, where the author was serious, in the other one language when the author wrote in another. Will anyone one day parody a humorous into a serious poem? It is uncertain. But there can be no doubt that many poems — even many great poems — would gain by being translated into the very language they were written in.

This brings up the problem as to whether it is art or the artist that matters, the individual or the product. If it be the final result that matters and that shall give delight, then we are justified in taking a famous poet's all but perfect poem, and, in the light of the criticism of another age, making it perfect by excision, substitution or addition. Wordsworth's Ode on Immortality is a great poem, but it is far from being a perfect poem. It could be rehandled to advantage.

The only interest in translations is when they are difficult, that is to say, either from one language into a widely different one, or from a very complicated poem though into a closely allied language. There is no fun in translating between, say, Spanish and Portuguese. Anyone who can read one language can automatically read the other, so there seems also to be no use in translating. But to translate Shakespeare into one of the Latin languages would be an exhilarating task. I doubt whether it can be done into French; it will be difficult to do into Italian or Spanish; Portuguese, being the most pliant and complex of the Romance languages, could possibly admit the translation.

s. d.

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