

Our Age of Translation and the 1970 World of Translation Conference

English literature lives on translation, it is fed by translation; every new exuberance, every new heave is stimulated by translation, every allegedly great age is an age of translations.—Ezra Pound, “How to Read”

Ages of translation have occurred around the globe since ancient times, like great waves of cultural exchange. Relatively recently, in the English-speaking world, Shakespeare’s day saw the beginning of our first age of translation, which lasted for more than a century. It has been called a “golden age” of translation. English expanded its vocabulary rapidly during this period, thanks in part to translators who were compelled to be inventive and grow the language with imported words or through sheer invention to convey the work of foreign authors. The swell of translated prose and poetry found a ready audience. The new printing press introduced books, widening the appetite for literature. Margaret Tyler’s 1578 translation of a contemporary Spanish novel became a best seller. That golden age of translation included the publication of the King James Bible, the translation destined to become the world’s all-time best seller. Translations of classical Greek and Latin works, often based on French translations, were especially popular—Homer and Virgil in English were sensations. Shakespeare drew on a translation of Plutarch, sometimes verbatim, for his play writing. The art of translation announced itself with a literary fanfare.

Closer to now, translation played a leading role in the modernist movement of the early twentieth century. Translations ranging from classical Chinese to French, Italian, and Spanish did certainly feed the new literature written in English, as Pound declared. His own robust work as a translator followed the long tradition seen in the nineteenth century that produced him, about which an 1895 essay titled “The Art of Translation,” published in *Littell’s Living Age* magazine, said: “Our own time is often described as an age of this, that, or the other. Whatever it is or is not, it is certainly an age of translation.” Today, American leaders in the world of translation claim our present time is an age of translation. In their book, *In Translation* (2013), Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky proclaim, “This new century has shown itself to be an age of translation.” Indeed, as both a literary activity and an academic field, translation has grown significantly in recent decades, despite the relatively low volume of translated books published each year in the United States, at around three percent of all books, with just under one percent literary.

PEN America’s Translating the Future conference with its related series of online conversations—organized by the Translation Committee—commemorates and carries forward PEN’s World of Translation conference held in New York in 1970. PEN’s president at the time, Charles Bracelen Flood, described it as “the first conference of literary translators ever to be held in the United States.” That conference was in many ways an early turning point in our current age of translation. It reflected the increased translation activity in fiction and poetry that had been building slowly but steadily since the Second World War. It also represented the parallel and newly organized force of translators themselves. Thirty-nine distinguished translators, poets, writers, editors, and publishers delivered papers at it. The conference crowned the upsurge in published translations occurring during the 1960s, when as Lawrence Venuti observes in *The Translator’s Invisibility* (1995) the percentage of translated books in the United States rose to nearly seven percent, with more fiction and poetry in the mix. Many of our authors, then, were

looking to translation, as readers and/or translators, to explore new literary possibilities, from narrative to verse.

Translated literature from around the world and throughout time was having a marked impact on U.S. writers and their work during the 1960s. Concerning poetry for example, Anne Sexton stated in a 1970 interview: “We are being influenced now by South American poets, Spanish poets, French poets. We are much more image-driven as a result.” Ethnopoetics resulting from translations of oral literature outside the Western tradition was exerting another influential force. In fiction, for example, the “boom” in Latin American literature, itself made possible by English translations, provided models of new narrative technique. Gregory Rabassa’s translation of Gabriel García Márquez’s novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), published in 1970 just a few months before the World of Translation conference, was a stunning literary moment that injected magical realism into our literature. Translation of different genres was feeding our poets and writers in their quest for new ways to express the experience of life.

In keeping with the early phase of this new age of translation, the 1960s also saw the cause of translation and translators become central to the mission of PEN America. Its famed Committee on Translations (later renamed Translation Committee) was founded in 1959 at the suggestion of then PEN president B. J. Chute. The committee immediately began to organize translators into a force for change. The goals of the new committee included establishment of a list of literary translators active in the United States, discussion of their problems and of possible ways and means of bettering their situation, and the preparation of a list of distinguished foreign works not yet translated into English or in need of retranslation. The committee dedicated itself to getting more recognition from publishers, reviewers, and the public of the role of the translator in cultural exchanges. An annual prize for published translations was established. Publishers were presented principles for better recognizing and paying translators in contracts.

In 1963, the first version of the committee’s manifesto on translation appeared in the first (and only) issue of its journal, *Translator*. It was written by distinguished author and translator Robert Payne, editor of the journal and future chair of the committee. The manifesto concluded this way: “The time has come for translators to come out in the open and throw away their badge of servility. Good translations must be fostered, cultivated, and rewarded. The honor of the translator should not go unhonored. We need schools to teach translation. We need to bring translators from abroad to learn the problems of translation in this country. Above all, we need to acknowledge the infinite benefits which come from the translator, and which can come from no one else.” The manifesto’s revolutionary tone was consistent with the decade’s broader movements of social and cultural change.

Six years later, in 1969, PEN published an expanded *Manifesto on Translation* in a booklet of eight pages, comprising sections titled: A Call for Action; The Rights of Translators; Translators’ Conference [this section refers to the World of Translation conference planned for the next year, where, in addition to a model contract and a “Bill of Rights for Translators,” the following “urgent matters” would be discussed]; Professorships of Translation; Exchange Fellowships; Prizes; Publishers; Translations from Russian; Untranslated Works; Index of Translations; A Journal for Translators. This new version of the manifesto, written by Payne (then committee chair), concluded firmly: “Translators are faced with a choice. Either they can continue to do nothing to improve their lot or they can join together to ensure that at long last

they will receive their due. The choice is between apathy and active engagement in a struggle for recognition, between silence and the living voice. The world of translation is still largely undiscovered and unexplored, and the time has come to set the projects in order and to learn what can and what cannot be done.”

PEN America’s Translation Committee continues to advance the cause defined in this manifesto. More work still needs to be done to achieve the multiple goals set forth in it, but much progress been made since the committee was established. Translators have come together to ensure they will receive their just due. The American Literary Translators Association (ALTA), formed in 1978, with shared goals to benefit translators and translation is a contributing force. Our age of translation will undoubtedly be viewed in time as a golden one to be expected of our globalized world and nation’s multiculturalism. The 1970 World of Translation conference did not happen out of the blue. The swell of translations in the sixties that reflected the quest of poets and writers actively seeking new possibilities, together with the coming together of translators at PEN America during that decade, set the stage for it. The Translating the Future conference aims to celebrate and further the ambitions articulated at that first translators’ conference—to honor translators, their essential work, and their role in cultural exchange. A new manifesto, authored by the Translation Committee, will be issued as part of the conference, defining the aspirations of translators now, in the great PEN tradition of advocacy.

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