The World As India To translate means many things, among them: to circulate, to transport, to disseminate, to explain, to make (more) accessible. By literary translation we mean, we could mean, the translation of the small percentage of published books actually worth reading: that is to say, worth rereading. I shall argue that a proper consideration of the art of literary translation is essentially a claim for the value of literature itself. Beyond the obvious need for the translator's facilitations in creating stock for literature as a small, prestigious import-export business, beyond the indispensable role that translation has in the construction of literature as a competitive sport, played both nationally and internationally (with rivalries, teams and lucrative prizes) - beyond the mercantile and the agonistic and ludic incentives for doing translation lies an older, frankly evangelical incentive, more difficult to avow in these self-consciously impious times. In what I call the evangelical incentive, the purpose of translation is to enlarge the readership of a book deemed to be important. It assumes that some books are discernibly better than other books, that literary merit exists in a pyramidal shape, and it is imperative for the works near the top to become available to as many as possible, which means to be widely translated, and as frequently retranslated as is feasible. Clearly, such a view of literature assumes that a rough consensus can be reached on which works are essential. It does not entail thinking the consensus - or canon - is fixed for all time and cannot be At the top of the pyramid are the books regarded as scripture: indispensable or essential esoteric knowledge which, by definition, invites translation. (Probably the most linguistically influential translations have been translations of the Bible: St. Jerome, Luther, Tyndale, the Authorized Version). Translation is then first of all making better known what deserves to be better known - because it is improving, deepening, exalting, because it is an indispensable legacy from the past, sacred or other. In a more secular register, translation was also thought to bring a benefit to the translator: translating was a valuable cognitive - and ethical - workout. In the era when it is proposed that computers - "translating machines" - will soon be able to perform most translating tasks, what we call literary translation perpetuates the traditional sense of what translation entails. The new view is that translation is the finding of equivalents, or, to vary the metaphor, that a translation is a problem, for which solutions can be devised. In contrast, the old understanding is that translation is the making of choices not simply between the stark dichotomies of good and bad, correct and incorrect, but among a more complex dispersion of alternatives, such as "good" versus "better" and "better" versus "best," not to mention such impure alternatives as "old-fashioned" versus "trendy," 'vulgar' versus 'pretentious," and 'abbreviated' versus 'wordy." Translating, which is here seen as an activity of choosing in the large sense, was a profession of individuals who were the bearers of a certain inward culture. To translate thoughtfully, painstakingly, ingeniously, respectfully, is a measure of the translator's fealty to the enterprise of literature itself. Choices that might be thought of as merely linguistic always imply ethical standards as well, which has made the activity of translating itself the vehicle of such values as integrity, responsibility, fidelity, boldness and humility. The ethical understanding of the task of the translator originated in the awareness that translation is busically an impossible task, if what is meant is that the translator is able to take up the next of an author written in one language, and deliver it, intact, without loss, into another language. Obviously, this is not what is being stressed by those who await impatiently the supersession of the translating machines. Literary translation is a branch of literature - anything but a mechanical task. But what makes translation so complex an understanding is that it responds to a variety of aims. There are demands which arise from the nature of literature as a form of communication. There is the mandate, with a work regarded as essential, to make it known to the widest possible audience. There is the difficulty of passing from one language to another, and of the intransigence of certain texts. For there is something inherent in the work quite outside the intentions or awareness of its author, which emerges as the cycle of translations begins - a quality that, for want of a better word, we have to call translatability. This nest of complex questions is often reduced to the perennial debate among translators - the debate about literalness - that dates back at least to ancient Rome, when Grock literature was translated into Latin, and continues to exercise translators in every country (and with respect to which there are a variety of national traditions and biases). The oldest theme of the discussion of translations is the role of accuracy and fidelity. Surely there must have been translators in the ancient world whose standard was strict literal fidelity (and damn cuphory!), a position defended with dazzling obstinacy by Vladimir Navokov in his Englishing of Eugene Onegin. How else to explain the bold insistence of St. Jerome himself (331-420), the first intellectual (as far as I know) from the ancient world to reflect extensively on the task of translation, that the inevitable result of aiming at a faithful reproduction of the author's words and images is the sacrifice of meaning and of grace? This is from the preface Jerome wrote to his translation into Latin of the Chronicle of Eusebius. (He translated it in 380-2, while he was living in Constantinople in order to take part in the Council - six years before he settled in Bethlehem, to improve his knowledge of Hebrew, and almost a decade before



this language as a medium of subjective, that is, literary expression.

In the matter of concrete practice, Schleiermacher takes up the exact

opposite of Jerome's position, arguing that the translator's primary duty is to

stay as close as possible to the original text, with the understanding that the

result will, precisely, read as a translation. To naturalize a foreign book is to lose

what is most valuable about it: the spirit of the language, the mental ethos out of

which the text emerges. Therefore, if a translation from, say, French or Russian

into German sounds as if it were originally written in German, the German-

he began the epochal task of translating the Hebrew Bible into Latin.) Of this

early translation from Greek, Jerome wrote:

"The World As India," by Susan Sontag, is reprinted without permission.

©The Times Literary Supplement, June 13, 2003.

Designed by Elena Grossman, Yale School of Art, Fall 2003.

It has long been the practice of learned men to

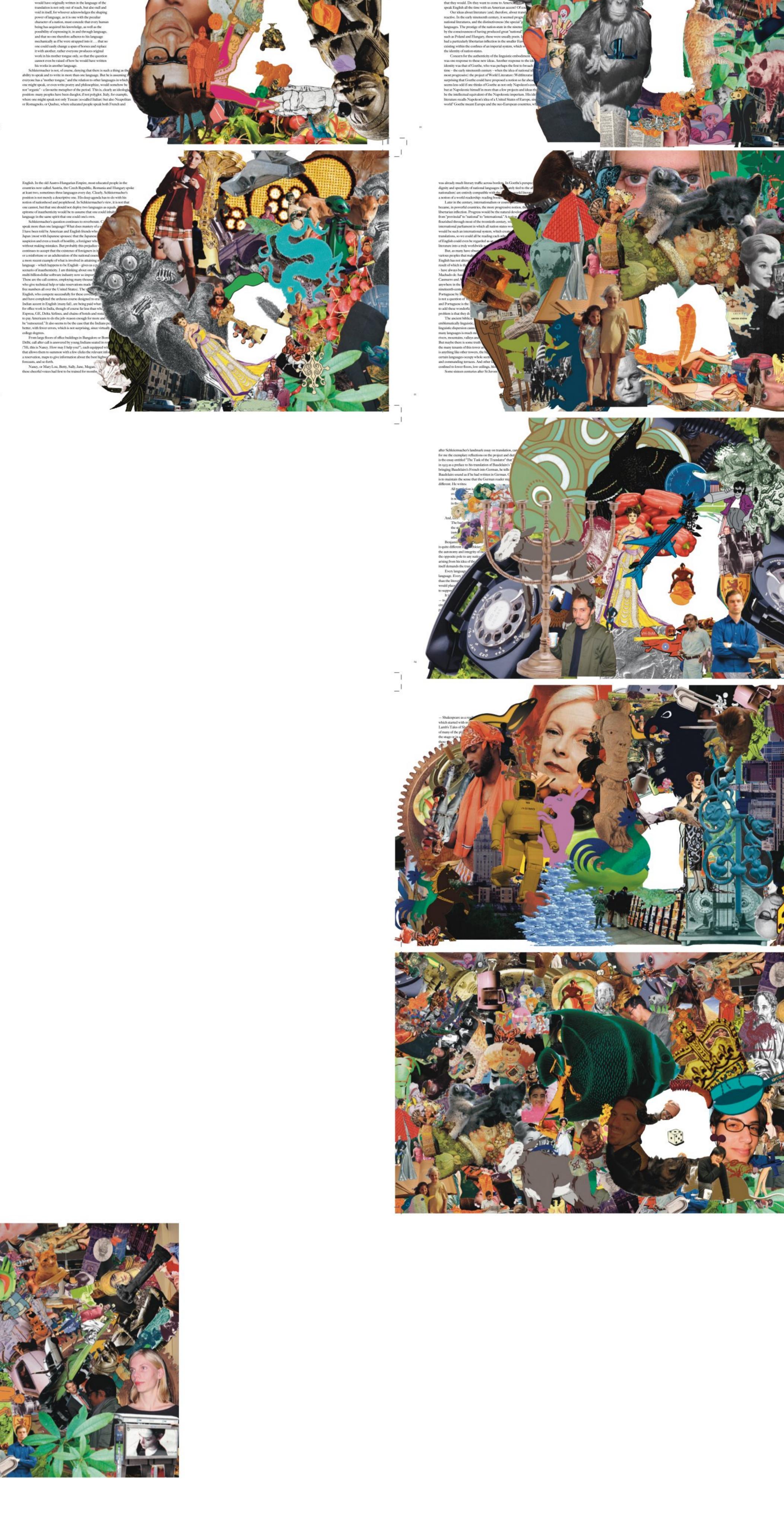
exercise their minds by rendering into Latin the

words of Greek writers and, what is more difficult,

to translate poems by illustrious authors though

trammeled by the further requirements of verse. It

was thus that our Cicero translated whole books of



tapes, to acquire a pleasant middle American (not an educated American accent,

and to learn basic American slung, informal idioms (including regional ones) and

elementary mass culture references (television personalities and the plots and

protagonists of the main sitcoms, the latest blockbuster in the multiplex, fresh baseball and basketball scores, and so on), so that if the exclusive with the ci

in the United States becomes prolonged, they will not falter

have been assigned American names and little biographies of

To pull this off, they have to be plausibly American to then

and have the means to continue to pass for Americans.

identities; place and date of birth, purent' occupation, and religious denomination (almost always Protesta)

they are. For example, if the client is calling from Savar

favourite kind of music, marital status, and the

operator might say she or he is in Atlanta. Lettin

India, would get pretend-Nancy or pretendroutinely, and undetectably monitored by

none of these young people has ever left

to be a real Nancy and a real Bill? Almost a



by Harry Zohn)

...ad of allowing his language to be powerfully

slator's exertions.

ted by the foreign tongue.

t with these remarks.

My sense of what literature can be, my reverence for the practice of literature as a vocation, and my identification of the vocation of the writer with the exercise of freedom - all these are inconceivable without the books I read in translation from an early age. Literature was mental travel: travel into the past and to other countries. And literature was criticism of one's own reality, in the light of a better standard. A writer is first of all a reader. It is from reading that I derive the standards by which I measure my own work, and according to which I fall lamentably short. It is from reading, even before writing, that I became part of a community - the community of literature - which includes more dead than living writers. Reading, and having standards, are then relations with the past and with what is other. Reading and having standards for literature are. indispensably in my view, relations with literature in translation.

In the contrary, his obligation ght have of something cansta. only a somewhat provisional way of ming to to.... s with the foreignness of languages. It * the highest praise of a translation, particularly : age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language. (Translated ac error of the translator is that he preserves ate in which his own language happens to be "'s reason for preferring a translation that reveals its foreignness from Se ... macher's. It is not because he wishes to promote " Jividual languages. Benjamin's thinking is at nalist agenda. It is a metaphysical consideration, a very nature of language, according to which language is part of Language, which is larger than any single andividual literary work is part of Literature, which is larger aure of any single language. It is something like this view - which J translation at the centre of the literary enterprise — that I have tried .s the nature of literature as we now understand it - rightly, I believe circulate, for diverse and necessarily impure motives. Translation is the adatory system of the world's literatures. Literary translation, I think, is reeminently an ethical task, and one which mirrors and duplicates the role of literature itself, which is to extend our sympathies, to educate the heart and mind; to create inwardness; to secure and deepend the awareness (with all its consequences) that other people, people different from us, really do exist. I am old enough to have grown up, in the American Southwest, thinking there was something called literature in English, of which American literature was a branch. The writer who mattered most to me as a child was Shakespeare

'n translation. need resident in literature one with the , ment of literature and of Weltliteratur th its recurrent dream of an old sit as equals. Literature .s an even greater role for ..r's books. The global speed , essential move towards transforming ystem of production and exchange. .ed, globalization brings uneven benefits to the 2 up the human population, and the globalization of a the history of prejudices about national identities, one at some languages - and the literature produced in them considered more important than others. An example, Surely s's The Posthumous Memories of Bras Cubas and Dom Juisio Azevedo's The Slum, three of the best novels written last part of the nineteenth century, would be as famous as a late ry literary masterpiece can now be, had they been written not in 'eazilians, but in German or French or Russian. Or English. (It 'ig' versus 'small' languages. Brazil hardly lacks inhabitants, sixth most widely spoken language in the world.) I hasten I books are translated, excellently, into English. The m't get mentioned. ' image of Babel suggests that we live in our differences, on top of one other. But common sense tells us our t be a tower. The geography of our dispersal into we horizontal than vertical (or so it seems), with oceans. To translate is to furry, to bring across. in the image. A tower has many levels, and e stacked one on top of the other. If Babel 'gher floors are the more coveted. Maybe ons of the upper floors, the great rooms inguages and their literary products are eked views. e, but barely more than a century

a another an one authentically .coord language mean? are long-time residents of typically regard with great speaks their language vill fade, as Japan s midst is not an oddity e. At the other extreme, tastery in a second erfect Schleiermachian ourishing enterprise in the ant to the Indian economy. ids of young women and men by dialling 1-800 (that is tolloung people, all of whom speak ~d jobs in the call centres, se all traces of their is a munificent salary it IBM, American urants would have more such tasks to rform the tasks all of them have bay or New as of small booths h a computer mution to make ay route, weather Bill, Jim, Wally, Franky instructors and by

when I es, true sone else's, w that the

* the most

selves. They American as number of sibrings, .nt), high school, favourite sport, 4ke. If asked, they can say where analt to Macon, the and they are in Bangalore. dill instantly fired. (All the calls are supervisors.) And, of course, virtually me. Would "Nancy" and "Bill" prefer "- there have been interviews - say a, where it would be normal to rse they would. ation) are necessarily asive to champion gnius") of the national nth century was faelled writers - in countries adeed, the national idea spean countries, still ere moving towards of literature a of national (and at a entity was). It may seem d of its time. It 'emporary, at could a of world ce by 'the sere there

unge. int with the s. k,

tive, the firmations of