Summer 6-15-2009

We’re All Me-ists Now

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our ability to wander in Garcia-Márquez’s surreal world.

Future columns will also introduce both Ivo Andrić, born in Travnik Bosnia in 1892 and who won the Nobel Prize in 1961, and André Gide, born in Paris France in 1869 and who won the Nobel Prize in 1947. The two books that I have added to my small but growing Nobel Literature Library are The Bridge on the Drina and The Immortalist, respectively. Both books have Notes or Forwards by the translators that give us a peek into their mindset.

Lovett Edwards writes in the Translator’s Forward of Ivo Andrić’s The Bridge on the Drina: “It is always an invidious task for the translator to comment on an author’s style. It should be — and I hope it is — evident in the translation. Andrić’s style has the sweep and surge of the sea, slow and yet profound, with occasional flashes of wit and irony. One subtlety cannot, however, be conveyed in translation: his use of varying dialects and localisms. I have conveyed then in the best manner I could, since a literal use of dialect would, even were it possible, be pedantic, dull, and cumbersome.”

Dorothy Bussy first translated André Gide’s The Immoralist to English in 1930. In 1970 Richard Howard offered a new translation and writes in the Translator’s Note of the book: “For forty years we have had a fair sense of this famous recital, why not now a fairer still?” “My effort, then, is to persist even further in the letter of the work itself. For Gide belongs, we now see — and happy the prospect would have made him — to that company of authors with whom we cannot be sated. We keep turning them over in our minds, returning to them: all translation date, certain works never do.” Almost 40 years later I read these words and marvel at the insight of how the right word conveys the perfect meaning, concept, idea of the story. And yet this is still a difficult feat when cultures, dialects, and languages collide.

More Internet sleuthing provided another glance at the relationship between the author, Orhan Pamuk and Gunel Gun, the translator of Pamuk’s book, The New Life. Interestingly, Gun is of Turkish descent and she writes fiction in English. Patrick T. Reardon, of the Chicago Tribune, recounts the “doozy” of the exchange between Pamuk and Gun over the use of the word “doozies.” “The Turkish word [used by Pamuk] can be translated ‘strange’ or ‘odd,’” but “doozy” is such a vibrant word. And the Turkish word had a kind of colloquial sound to it.”

The subject of Nobel Laureates in Literature is obviously a passion and whenever I find a good opportunity I find a way to get the conversation going on this matter. Avondale Wine and Cheese located on Savannah Highway in the Avondale Business District is a funky foodie boutique shop where you can enjoy a glass of wine, unique handcrafted cheeses, and conversation with a variety of fun people that pass through the door. One Monday evening, I met Bill and his wife Ava at Avondale Wine and Cheese. Bill Lavery is a retired Professor of Russian and Eastern European History from Furman University. We were enjoying our wine, cheese and conversation when the subject of novels and translators was soon on the plate. Bill gave me numerous suggestions of translators to research and related fun stories of his travels in both Russia and Eastern Europe. Ultimately he shared this personal story with me. Before Bill became a retired Professor of Russian and Eastern European History he was a student of Walter Arndt at the University of North Carolina. Walter Arndt is currently Professor Emeritus at Dartmouth and is a noted translator. His translation of Alexander Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin won the Bollingen Poetry Translation Prize in 1962. Pushkin is considered the pinnacle writer for the Russian people and the difficulty in translating his works is in the conveying of the “Russian soul.” Arndt’s translations were more literal, and academic as compared to Vladimir Nabokov’s translations that were more colloquial and loose. According to Bill’s story, the two “vied, sparred and spate at one another” about their disparate approaches. So Bill finds himself studying Russian from Arndt. “Arndt used to send us (seven Russian lit types and me, a, pardon the word, mere historian) to the board with a quatrain, drawn by chance, chalk and a dictionary.” We worked, I sweated, and he reviewed the work. Gazing at mine, Arndt said, “Mr. Lavery!” “Sir,” I said. “You have the soul of an ox.” “Yes, sir,” I said. “End of the story.”
We don’t like to be, or have our views, undermined. In fact, we avoid it at all cost. But on the Web, it’s all we do (Kristof calls this, ironically enough, “truth-seeking”). In fact, on the Web it’s all we do because the search engines, all of them, look for materials the way we structure the searches: according to our prejudices.

I believe it was Blake who said “opposition is true friendship.” I’ve always thought that, even while I’ve been ready to tear into an opponent who held a view antipodean to my own. My fear is that with the loss of all these newspapers (and if newspapers are gone, will magazines soon follow?) we’ll all lose any chance to challenge ourselves. We’ll fall into our hidebound intellectual silos and never be able to get out again, nor will we want to. Once there, we’ll think the world is all about us, agrees with us, holds the same opinions as we do. Where else will you get the chance to be intellectually challenged on what you hold dear if not in a daily read that isn’t about you? You’ll not likely find it at your favorite bar, your workplace, your church or civic group because we choose those things precisely because they make us feel comfortable. With the loss of newspapers, what’s left to challenge us? And this doesn’t begin to touch the loss of truly investigative reporting that uncovers something important, like a Madoff or a Monica.

It’s not just the loss of newspapers, that I worry about losing. It’s the loss of really engaged, daily reading. Hardly anyone does that any more. We all read in bits and pieces. In starts and stops. In snatches and grabs. On the Internet. And for most of us, being able to really concentrate for hours on end is slowly slipping away with each page refresh. Try this the next time you’re around a teenager, Hand out The Wall Street Journal or The New York Times. But get ready to run. If caught, you’ll probably be arrested for child abuse.

I’m not saying that people do not read on the Web. Those who always have are now reading and will likely continue to do so. But even these folks, I fear, will read more and more only those things with which they agree if our only medium is the Web. If we think securing the peace in the Middle East is hard, wait a decade and try to find it in your own neighborhood, assuming anyone there is talking to anyone else. Kristof calls newspaper reading a “daily workout” as if at the gym. And he’s right. The trouble is that failing to do it is like letting that treadmill become a wardrobe. Pretty soon, you get short of breath and there’s only one thing worse:

Being short of thought.

If there’s any bailout money left, newspapers might be a good place to start. I’ve gotten more out of them than I ever did GM.

I know Gordon Gekko was a terrible stereotype, and I really don’t favor greed. But I do favor one thing that sounds a bit like his famous line:

Read. Read is Good.