Translation: Theory

Literalness and Freedom

A translator is not necessarily bound to the exact word and letter of the original he chooses; he can make his own poem out of it, if he likes, and that is what is very often done. This is all the more legitimate since we find that literal translations more completely betray than those that are reasonably free — turning life into death and poetic power into poverty and flatness. It is not many who can carry over the spirit of a poem, the characteristic power of its expression and the turn of its rhythmical movement from one language to another, especially when the tongues in question are so alien in temperament to each other as English and Bengali. When that can be done, there is the perfect translation.

The proper rule about literalness, I suppose, is that one should keep as close as possible to the original provided the result is that the translation does not read like a translation but like an original poem in Bengali and as far as possible as if it were the original poem originally written in Bengali. Whether that ideal is always realisable is another matter. When it can’t be done one has to dodge or deviate. I admit that I have not practised what I preached, — whenever I translated, I was careless of the hurt feelings of the original text and transmogrified it without mercy into whatever my fancy chose. But that is a high and mighty criminality which one ought not to imitate. Latterly I have tried to be more moral in my ways, I don’t know with what success. But anyhow it is a case of “Do what I preach and avoid what I practise.”

10 October 1934
Translation of Prose into Poetry

I think it is quite legitimate to translate poetic prose into poetry; I have done it myself when I translated *The Hero and the Nymph* on the ground that the beauty of Kalidasa’s prose is best rendered by poetry in English, or at least that I found myself best able to render it in that way. Your critic’s rule seems to me rather too positive; like all rules it may stand in principle in a majority of cases, but in the minority (which is the best part, for the less is often greater than the more) it need not stand at all. Pushed too far, it would mean that Homer and Virgil can be translated only in hexameters. Again, what of the reverse cases — the many fine prose translations of poets so much better and more akin to the spirit of the original than any poetic version of them yet made? One need not go farther than Tagore’s English version of his *Gitanjali*. If poetry can be translated so admirably (and therefore legitimately) into prose, why should not prose be translated legitimately (and admirably) into poetry? After all, rules are made more for the convenience of critics than as a binding law for creators.

9 November 1931