Translation: Practice

Remarks on Some Translations

I do not think it is the ideas that make the distinction between European and Indian tongues — it is the turn of the language. By taking over the English turn of language into Bengali one may very well fail to produce the effect of the original because this turn will seem outlandish in the new tongue, but one can always by giving a right turn of language more easily acceptable to the Bengali mind and ear make the idea as natural and effective as in the original; or even if the idea is strange to the Bengali mind one can by the turn of language acclimatise it, make it acceptable. The original thought in the passage you are translating¹ may be reduced to something like this: “Here is all this beautiful world, the stars, the forest, the birds — I have not yet lived long enough to know them all or for them to know me so that there shall be friendship and familiarity between us and now I am thus untimely called away to die.” That is a perfectly human feeling, quite as possible, more easily possible, to an Indian than to a European (witness Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*) and can very well be acceptable. But the turn given it in English is abrupt and bold though quite forcible and going straight home — in Bengali it may sound strange and not go home. If so you have to find a turn in Bengali for the idea which will be as forcible and direct; not here only but everywhere this should be the rule. Naturally one should not go too far away from the original and say something quite different in substance but, subject to that limitation, any necessary freedom is quite admissible.

October 1934

¹ I have not numbered half the brilliant birds
In one green forest . . .
Nor have I seen the stars so very often
That I should die. — Sri Aurobindo, Love and Death
It is not that I find the translations here satisfactory in the full sense of the word, but they are better than I expected. There is none of them, not even the best, which I would pronounce to be quite the thing. But this “quite the thing” is so rare a trouvaille, it is as illusive as the capture of eternity in the hours. As for catching the subtleties, the difficulty lies in one supreme faculty of the English language which none other I know possesses, the ease with which it finds the packed allusive turn, the suggestive unexpressed, the door opening on things ineffable. Bengali, like French, is very clear and luminous and living and expressive, but to such clear languages the expression of the inexpressible is not so easy — one has to go out of one’s way to find it. Witness Mallarmé’s wrestlings with the French language to find the symbolic expression — the right turn of speech for what is behind the veil. I think that even in these languages the power to find it with less effort must come; but meanwhile there is the difference.

Your translations.

1. Translation of Baudelaire,2 very good, third and fourth verse superb. Literalness here does not matter so long as you are faithful to the spirit and the sense. But I don’t think you are justified in inserting volupté — volupté here means bold and intense pleasure of the higher vital, not the lesser pleasure of the senses, — it is the volupté you do actually get when you rise, whether inwardly or outwardly like the aviators into the boundless heights.

2. Shelley.3 Good poetry, but as a translation vulnerable in the head and the tail. In the head because, it seems to me that your and may lay itself open to the construction that human love is a rich precious thing which the poet unfortunately does not possess and it is only because of this deplorable poverty that he offers the psychic devotion, less warm and rich and desirable: but still in its own way rare and

2 Élévation (in Les fleurs du mal) — Ed.
3 One word is too often profaned — Ed.
valuable! I exaggerate perhaps, but, still, if it is at all open to a
meaning of this kind, then it says the very reverse of Shelley’s
intended significance. For in the English “what men call love”
is strongly depreciatory, and can only mean something inferior,
something that is poor and not rich, not truly love. Shelley says,
in substance, “Human vital love is a poor inferior thing, a coun-
terfeit of true love, which I cannot offer to you. But there is
a greater thing, a true psychic love, all worship and devotion,
which men do not readily value, being led away by the vital
glamour, but which the heavens do not reject, though it is offered
from something so far below them, so maimed and ignorant and
sorrow-vexed as the human consciousness which is to the divine
consciousness as the moth to the star, as night to the day. And
will not you accept this from me, you who in your nature are
kin to the heavens, you who seem to me to have something of
the divine nature, to be something bright and happy and pure,
far above the ‘sphere of our sorrow’?” Of course all that is not
said, but only suggested — but it is obviously the spirit of the
poem. As to the tail, I doubt whether your last line brings out
the sense of “something afar from the sphere of our sorrow”. If
I make these criticisms at all, it is not because your version is
not good, but because you have accustomed me to find in you
a power of rendering the spirit and sense of your original while
turning it into fine poetry in its new tongue which I would not
expect or exact from any other translator.

3. Amal. I think here you have not so much rendered the
English lines into Bengali as translated Amal into Dilip. Is not
that the sense of your plea for Bengali colour and simile? Amal’s
lines are not easily translatable, least of all, I imagine, into Ben-
gali. There is in them a union or rather fusion of high severity of
speech with exaltation and both with a pervading intense sweet-
ness which it is almost impossible to transfer bodily without
loss into another language. There is no word in excess, none
that could have been added or changed without spoiling the ex-
pression, every word just the right revelatory one — no colour,

\[\text{This errant life (see page 501–02) — Ed.}\]
no ornamentation, but a sort of suppressed burning glow; no similes, but images which have been fused inseparably into the substance of the thought and feeling—the thought itself perfectly developed, not idea added to idea at the will of the fancy, but perfectly interrelated and linked together like the limbs of an organic body. It is high poetic style in its full perfection and nothing of all that is transferable. You have taken his last line and put in a lotus face and made divine love bloom in it,—a pretty image, but how far from the glowing impassioned severity of phrase, “And mould thy love into a human face”! So with your মূৰ্তি প্রাপ্তি and the “heart to heart words intimate”. I do not suppose it could have been done otherwise, however, or done better; and what you write now is always good poetry—which is what I suppose Tagore meant to say when he wrote “তোমার আর ভয় নাহি”.

And after all I have said nothing about Huxley or Baudelaire! 11 July 1931

Your translations are very good, but much more poetic than the originals: some would consider that a fault, but I do not. The songs of these Bhaktas (Kabir and others) are very much in a manner and style that might be called the “hieratic primitive”, like a picture all in intense line, but only two or three essential lines at a time; the only colour is the hue of a single and very simple strong spiritual idea or emotion or experience. It is hardly possible to carry that over into modern poetry; the result would probably be, instead of the bare sincerity of the original, some kind of ostensible artificial artlessness that would not be at all the same thing.

I have no objection to your substituting Krishna for Rama, and if Kabir makes any, which is not likely, you have only to sing to him softly, “Rām Śyām judā mat karo bhāi”, and he will be silenced at once.

The bottom reason for the preference of Rama or Krishna is not sectarian but psychological. The Northerner prefers Rama because the Northerner is the mental, moral and social man in
his type, and Rama is a congenial Avatar for that type; the Bengali, emotional and intuitive, finds all that very dry and plumps for Krishna. I suspect that is the whole mystery of the choice. Apart from these temperamental preferences and turning to essentials, one might say that Rama is the Divine accepting and glorifying a mould of the human mental, while Krishna seems rather to break the human moulds in order to create others from the higher planes; for he comes down direct from the Overmind and hammers with its forces on the mind and vital and heart of man to change and liberate and divinise them. At least that is one way of looking at their difference.

March 1932

If your translations are read as independent poems they are very beautiful, but they have more of the true “eclogue” than Baudelaire. To be literal (grammatically) is hardly possible in a poetic version and the style of Baudelaire is not easy to transcribe into another language. There is an effect of masculine ease and grace which is really the result of the verbal economy and restraint of which you speak and has therefore at its base a kind of strong austerity supporting the charm and apparent ease — it is very difficult to get all that in together. It is what has happened in your translation — one element has been stressed at the expense of the other. Certain elements that are not Baudelaire have got in here and there, as in the lines you point out. On the other hand at other places by departing from closeness to the original you have got near to the Baudelaire manner at its strongest, e.g.

I’d have my eyrie hard against the sky.

20 March 1934

There is no question of defective poetry or lines. There are two ways of rendering a poem from one language into another — one is to keep strictly to the manner and turn of the original, the other to take its spirit, sense and imagery and reproduce them freely so as to suit the new language. Amal’s poem is exceedingly
succinct, simply-direct and compact in word, form, rhythm, yet
full of suggestion — it would perhaps not be possible to do the
same thing in Bengali; it is necessary to use an ampler form, and
this is what you have done. Your translation is very beautiful;
only, side by side with the original, one looks like a delicate
miniature, the other like a rich enlargement. If you compare his

Where is it calling
The eyes of night

with the corresponding lines in your poem, you can see the
difference. I did not mean to suggest that it was necessary to
change anything. 11 July 1937

The English Bible

The English Bible is a translation, but it ranks among the finest
pieces of literature in the world. 27 February 1936