When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate; the child who asks his mother the meaning of a word is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into the simple words he already knows. In this sense, translation within the same language is not essentially different from translation between two tongues, and the histories of all peoples parallel the child’s experience. Even the most isolated tribe, sooner or later, comes into contact with other people who speak a foreign language. The sounds of a tongue we do not know may cause us to react with astonishment, annoyance, indignation, or amused perplexity, but these sensations are soon replaced by uncertainties about our own language. We become aware that language is not universal; rather, there is a plurality of languages, each one alien and unintelligible to the others. In the past, translation dispelled the uncertainties. Although language is not universal, languages nevertheless form part of a universal society in which, once some difficulties have been overcome, all people can communicate with and understand each other. And they can do so because in any language men always say the same things. Universality of the spirit was the response to the confusion of Babel: many languages, one substance. It was through the plurality of religions that Pascal became convinced of the truth of Christianity; translation responded to the diversity of languages with the concept of universal intelligibility. Thus, translation was not only a confirmation but also a guarantee of the existence of spiritual bonds.

The modern age destroyed that assurance. As he rediscovered the infinite variety of temperaments and passions, as he observed the vast array of customs and societies, man began to find it difficult to recognize himself in other men. Until that time, the heathen had been a deviant to be suppressed through conversion or extermination, baptism or the sword, but the heathen presented in eighteenth-century salons was a new creature who, although he might speak his hosts’ language to perfection, nevertheless embodied an inexorable foreignness. He was not subjected to conversion but to controversy and criticism; the originality of his views, the simplicity of his customs, and even the violence of his passions verified the absurdity and futility, to say nothing of the infamy, of baptism and conversion. A new course was taken: the religious quest for spiritual universality was superseded by an intellectual curiosity intent upon unearthing equally universal differences. Foreignness was no longer the exception, but the rule. This shift in perception is both paradoxical and revealing. The savage represented civilized man’s nostalgia, his alter ego, his lost half. And translation reflected this shift: no longer was it an effort to illustrate the ultimate sameness of men; it became a vehicle to expose their individualities. Translation had once served to reveal the preponderance of similarities over differences; from this time forward translation would serve to illustrate the irreconcilability of differences, whether these stem from the foreignness of the savage or of our neighbor.

During his travels, Dr. Johnson once made an observation that expressed the new attitude very aptly: “A blade of grass is always a blade of grass, whether in one country or another . . . . Men and women are my subjects of inquiry; let us see how these differ from those we have left behind.” Dr. Johnson’s words convey two thoughts, and both foretell the dual road the modern age was to follow. The first refers to the separation of man from nature, a separation that would be transformed into confrontation and conflict: man’s mission was no longer his own salvation but the mastery of nature. The second refers to the separation of man from man. The world is no longer a world, an indivisible whole; there is a split between nature and civilization, a split compounded by further subdivisions into separate cultures. A plurality of languages and societies: each language is a view of the world, each civilization is a world. The sun praised in an Aztec poem is not the sun of the Egyptian hymn, although both speak of the same star. For more than two centuries, philosophers and historians, and more recently anthropologists and linguists as well, have been accumulating ex-
samples of the insurmountable differences between individuals, societies, and eras. The greatest schism, scarcely less profound than that between nature and culture, separates primitives from the civilized; further divisions arise from the variety and diversity of civilizations. Within each civilization, more differences emerge: the language that enables us to communicate with one another also encloses us in an invisible web of sounds and meanings, so that each nation is imprisoned by its language, a language further fragmented by historical eras, by social classes, by generations. As for the intercourse among individuals belonging to the same community, each one is hemmed in by his own self-concern.

With all this, one would have expected translators to accept defeat, but this has not been the case; instead, there has been a contradictory and complementary trend to translate even more. This is paradoxical because, while translation overcomes the differences between one language and another, it also reveals them more fully. Thanks to translation, we become aware that our neighbors do not speak and think as we do. On the one hand, the world is presented to us as a collection of similarities; on the other, as a growing heap of texts, each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations of translations. Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation—first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase. However, the inverse of this reason is also entirely valid. All texts are originals because each translation has its own distinctive character. Up to a point, each translation is a creation and thus constitutes a unique text.

The discoveries of anthropology and linguistics do not impeach translation itself, but a certain ingenuous notion of translation, the word-for-word translation suggestively called servil (servile) in Spanish. I do not mean to imply that literal translation is impossible; what I am saying is that it is not translation. It is a mechanism, a string of words that helps us read the text in its original language. It is a glossary rather than a translation, which is always a literary activity. Without exception, even when the translator's sole intention is to convey meaning, as in the case of scientific texts, translation implies a transformation of the original. That transformation is not—nor can it be—anything but literary, because all translations utilize the two modes of expression to which, according to Roman Jakobson, all literary procedures are reduced: metonym and metaphor. The original text never reappears in the new language (this would be impossible); yet it is ever present because the translation, without saying it, expresses it constantly, or else converts it into a verbal object that, although different, reproduces it: metonym or metaphor. Both, unlike explicative translations and paraphrase, are rigorous forms that are in no way inconsistent with accuracy. The metonym is an indirect description, and the metaphor a verbal equation.

The greatest pessimism about the feasibility of translation has been concentrated on poetry, a remarkable posture since many of the best poems in every Western language are translations, and many of those translations were written by great poets. Some years ago the critic and linguist Georges Mounin wrote a book about translation. He pointed out that it is generally, albeit reluctantly, conceded that it is possible to translate the denotative meanings of a text but that the consensus is almost unanimous that the translation of connotative meanings is impossible. Woven of echoes, reflections, and the interaction of sound with meaning, poetry is a fabric of connotations and, consequently, untranslatable. I must confess that I find this idea offensive, not only because it conflicts with my personal conviction that poetry is universal, but also because it is based on an erroneous conception of what translation is. Not everyone shares my view, and many modern poets insist that poetry is untranslatable. Perhaps their opinion comes from their inordinate attachment to verbal matter, or perhaps they have become ensnared in the trap of subjectivity. A mortal trap, as Quevedo warns: "the waters of the abyss / where I came to love myself." Unamuno, in one of his lyric-patriotic outbursts, provides an example of this kind of verbal infatuation:

Avila, Malaga, Caceres, Jativa, Merida, Cordoba, Cuidad Rodrigo, Sepulveda, Ubeda, Arévalo, Frómista, Zumarraga, Salamanca, Turégano, Zaragoza, Lérida, Zamarramala, you are the names that stand tall, free, untarnished, an honor roll, the untranslatable marrow of our Spanish tongue.
"The untranslatable marrow / of our Spanish tongue" is an outrageous metaphor (marrow and tongue?), but a perfectly translatable one since its image is universal. Many poets have utilized Unamuno's stylistic device in other languages: the lists of words differ, but the context, the emotion, and the meaning are comparable. It is remarkable that the untranslatable essence of Spain should consist of a succession of Roman, Arabic, Celtiberian and Basque names. It is equally remarkable that Unamuno should have translated the name of the Catalan city Lleida into Castilian (Lerida). And what is perhaps most surprising of all is that he quoted the following lines by Victor Hugo as an epigraph to his poem, apparently not realizing that by doing so he was contradicting his own assertion that the names were untranslatable:

Et tout tremble, Irún, Coïmbre,
Santander, Almodóvar,
si tôt qu'on entend le timbre
des cymbals de Bivar.

And everything trembles, Irún, Coimbra,
Santander, Almodóvar,
once we hear the timbre
of the cymbals of Bivar.

In both Spanish and French, the meanings and the emotions are the same. Since, strictly speaking, the proper nouns cannot be translated, Hugo merely recites them in Spanish, making no attempt to gallicize them. The recitation is effective because the words, stripped of precise meaning and converted into verbal castanets, true mantras, echo through the French text even more exotically than in the Spanish. ... Translation is very difficult—no less difficult than writing so-called original texts—but it is not impossible. The poems of Hugo and Unamuno illustrate that connotative meanings can be preserved if the poet-translator successfully reproduces the verbal situation, the poetic context, into which they are mounted. Wallace Stevens has given us a sort of model image of that situation in a fine passage:

... the hard hidalgo
Lives in the mountainous character of his speech;

And in that mountainous mirror Spain acquires
The knowledge of Spain and of the hidalgo's hat—

A seeming of the Spaniard, a style of life,
The invention of a nation in a phrase.

Here language has become a landscape, and that landscape, in turn, is a creation, the metaphor of a nation or of an individual—a verbal topography that communicates fully, that translates fully. Phrases form a chain of mountains, and the mountains are the characters, the ideograms of a civilization. But not only is the interaction between echoes and words overwhelming; it holds an inescapable threat. The moment comes when, surrounded by words on all sides, we feel intimidated by the distressing bewilderment of living among names and not among things, the bewilderment of even having a name:

Amid the reeds and the late afternoon,
how strange that I am named Federico!

In this case, too, the experience is universal: García Lorca would have felt the same uneasiness if he had been called Tom, Jean, or Chuang Tzu. To lose our name is like losing our shadow; to be only our name is to be reduced to a shadow. The absence of any correlation between things and their names is doubly intolerable: either the meanings evaporate or the things vanish. A world of pure meanings is as inhospitable as a world of things without meaning—without names. It is language that makes the world habitable. The instant of perplexity at the oddness of being called Federico or Só Ji is immediately followed by the invention of another name, a name that is, in a way, a translation of the first: the metaphor or metonym that, without saying it, says it.

In recent years, perhaps because of the increasing primacy of linguistics, there has been a tendency to deemphasize the decidedly literary nature of translation. There is no such thing—or can there be—as a science of translation, although translation can and should be studied scientifically. Just as literature is a specialized function of language, so translation is a specialized function of literature. And what, we might ask, of the machines that translate? If they ever really translate, they too will perform a literary operation, and they too will produce what translators now do: literature. Translation is an exercise in which what is decisive, given the necessary linguistic proficiency, is the translator's initiative, whether that translator be
a machine programmed by man or a living human being surrounded by dictionaries. Arthur Waley has put it well:

A French scholar wrote recently with regard to translators: "Qu'ils s'effacent derriere les textes et ceux-ci, s'ils ont été vraiment compris, parlent d'eux-mêmes." [They should make themselves invisible behind the texts and, if fully understood, the texts will speak for themselves.]

Except in the rather rare case of plain concrete statements such as "The cat chases the mouse," there are seldom sentences that have exact word-to-word equivalents in another language. It becomes a question of choosing between various approximations. . . . I have always found that it was I, not the texts, that had to do the talking.

It would be difficult to improve upon this statement.

In theory, only poets should translate poetry; in practice, poets are rarely good translators. They almost invariably use the foreign poem as a point of departure toward their own. A good translator moves in the opposite direction: his intended destination is a poem analogous although not identical to the original poem. He moves away from the poem only to follow it more closely. The good translator of poetry is a translator who is also a poet—like Arthur Waley—or a poet who is also a good translator—like Nerval when he translated the first Faust. Nerval also wrote some fine, truly original imitations of Goethe, Jean Paul, and other German poets. The "imitation" is the twin sister of translation: they are similar, but we should not mistake one for the other. They are like Justine and Juliette, the two sisters in Sade's novels. . . . The reason many poets are unable to translate poetry is not purely psychological, although egoism has a part in it, but functional: poetic translation, as I intend to demonstrate, is a procedure analogous to poetic creation, but it unfolds in the opposite direction.

Every word holds a certain number of implicit meanings; when a word is combined with others to make up a phrase, one of those meanings is activated and becomes predominant. In prose there tends to be a single meaning, while, as has often been noted, one of the characteristics of poetry, and perhaps its distinguishing trait, is the preservation of a plurality of meanings. What we are seeing here is actually a general property of language; poetry accentuates it, but, to a lesser degree, it is also present in common speech and even in prose. (This circumstance confirms that prose, in the strictest sense of the term, has no real existence: it is a concept required by the intellect.) Critics have devoted a good deal of attention to this disturbing peculiarity of poetry, but they have disregarded the equally fascinating peculiarity that corresponds to this kind of mobility and ambiguity of meanings: the immobility of signs. Poetry radically transforms language, and it does so in a direction opposite to that of prose. In one case, the mobility of characters tends to fix a single meaning; in the other, the plurality of meanings tends to fix the characters. Language, of course, is a system of mobile signs that may be interchangeable to some degree; one word can be replaced by another, and each phrase can be expressed (translated) by another. To paraphrase Peirce, we might say that the meaning of a word is always another word. Whenever we ask, "What does this phrase mean?" the reply is another phrase. Yet once we move into the terrain of poetry, we find that words have lost their mobility and their interchangeability. The meanings of a poem are multiple and changeable; the words of that poem are unique and irreplaceable. To change them would be to destroy the poem. Poetry is expressed in language, but it goes beyond language.

The poet, immersed in the movement of language, in constant verbal preoccupation, chooses a few words—or is chosen by them. As he combines them, he constructs his poem: a verbal object made of irreplaceable and immovable characters. The translator's starting point is not the language in movement that provides the poet's raw material but the fixed language of the poem. A language congealed, yet living. His procedure is the inverse of the poet's: he is not constructing an unalterable text from mobile characters; instead, he is dismantling the elements of the text, freeing the signs into circulation, then returning them to language. In its first phase, the translator's activity is no different from that of a reader or critic: each reading is a translation, and each criticism is, or begins as, an interpretation. But reading is translation within the same language, and criticism is a free version of the poem or, to be more precise, a transposition. For the critic, the poem is the starting point toward another text, his own, while the translator, in another language and with different characters, must compose a poem analogous to the original. The second phase of the translator's activity is parallel to the poet's, with this essential difference: as he writes, the poet does not know where his poem will lead him; as he translates, the translator knows that his completed effort must reproduce the poem he has before him. The two phases of translation, therefore, are an inverted parallel of poetic creation. The result is a reproduction of
accompanied by intercrossings between different poetic traditions. At times these intercrossings have taken the form of imitation, and at others they have taken the form of translation. In this respect, the history of European poetry might be viewed as a chronicle of the convergences of the various traditions that compose what is known as Western literature, not to mention the presence of the Arabic tradition in Provençal poetry, or the presence of haiku, and the Chinese tradition in modern poetry. Critics study "influences," but the term is not exact. It would be more sensible to consider Western literature as an integral whole in which the central protagonists are not national traditions—English, French, Portuguese, German poetry—but styles and trends. No trend, no style has ever been national, nor even the so-called artistic nationalism. Styles have invariably been translinguistic: Donne is closer to Quevedo than to Wordsworth; there is an evident affinity between Gongora and Marino while nothing, save their common language, unites Gongora with Juan Ruiz, the archpriest of Hita, who, in turn, is sometimes reminiscent of Chaucer. Styles are coalescent and pass from one language to another; the works, each rooted in its own verbal soil, are unique ... unique, but not isolated: each is born and lives in relation to other works composed in different languages. Thus, the plurality of languages and the singularity of the works produce neither complete diversity nor disorder, but quite the opposite: a world of interrelationships made up of contradictions and harmonies, unions and digressions.

Throughout the ages, European poets—and now those of both halves of the American continent as well—have been writing the same poem in different languages. And each version is an original and distinct poem. True, the synchronization is not perfect, but if we take a step backward, we can understand that we are hearing a concert, and that the musicians, playing different instruments, following neither conductor nor score, are in the process of collectively composing a symphony in which improvisation is inseparable from translation and creation is indistinguishable from imitation. At times, one of the musicians will break out into an inspired solo; soon the others pick it up, each introducing his own variations that make the original motif unrecognizable. At the end of the last century, French poetry amazed and scandalized Europe with the solo begun by Baudelaire and brought to a close by Mallarmé. Hispano-American "modernist" poets were among the first to develop an ear for this new music; in imitating it, they made it their own, they changed it, and they sent it on to Spain where it was once again re-created. A little later the English-language poets performed something similar but on different instruments in a different key and tempo: a more sober and critical version in which Laforgue, not Verlaine, occupied the central position. Laforgue's special status helps explain the character of Anglo-American modernism, a movement that was simultaneously symbolist and anti-symbolist. Pound and Eliot, following Laforgue's lead, introduced criticism of symbolism into symbolism itself, in ridicule of what Pound termed the "funny symbolist trappings." This critical perception set the framework for their writing, and a little later they produced poetry that was not modernist but modern, and thus they initiated, together with Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and others, a new solo—the solo of contemporary Anglo-American poetry.

Laforgue's legacy to English and Spanish poetry is a prime example of the interdependence between creation and imitation, translation and original work. The French poet's influence on Eliot and Pound is a matter of common knowledge, but what is less often appreciated is his influence on Hispano-American poets. In 1905, the Argentinian Leopoldo Lugones, a great poet whose work has not attracted the critical attention it deserves, published a volume of poems, Los crepitáculos del jardín, in which some Laforguean features appeared for the first time in Spanish: irony, the clash of colloquial with literary language, violent images that juxtaposed urban absurdity with nature depicted as a grotesque ma-tron. Some of his poems seem to have been written on one of those dimanches bannis de l'Infini, the fin-de-siècle Sundays of the Hispano-American bourgeoisie. In 1909 Lugones published Lunnario sentimental. Although it imitated Laforgue, this volume was one of the most original of its time, and even today can be read...
with admiration and delight. *Lunario sentimental* exerted a tremendous influence on Hispano-American poets, but it was particularly beneficial and inspiring to the Mexican poet López Velarde. In 1919 López Velarde published *Zozobra*, the principal volume of Hispano-American "postmodernism," that is, our own antisybolist symbolism. Two years earlier, Eliot had published *Prufrock and Other Observations*. In Boston, a Protestant Laforgue had emerged from Harvard; in Zacatecas, a Catholic Laforgue had slipped out of a seminary. Sensuality, blasphemy, humor, what López Velarde called an "intimate reactionary sadness." The Mexican poet died not long afterward in 1921, at the age of thirty-three. His work ended where Eliot's began... Boston and Zacatecas: the coupling of these two names brings a smile as if it were one of those incongruent associations Laforgue so greatly enjoyed. Two poets writing in different languages, neither even suspecting the existence of the other, almost simultaneously produced different but equally original versions of the poetry written some years earlier by a third poet in yet another language.

Shakespeare's sonnet 105, a poem about the virtues of the author's young friend and, simultaneously, a poem about the poetic writing that extols them, ends with the couplet:

Fair, kind, and true, have often lived alone.
Which three till now, never kept seat in one.

Celan's translation of this sonnet concludes with the verses:

"Schön, gut und treu" so oft getrennt, geschieden.
In Einem will ich drei zusammenschmieden.¹

Beauty, goodness, and fidelity are the three virtues that the poet ascribes to his friend in the preceding quatrains, and it is to their expression that he wishes to confine his writing, indeed, even its vocabulary. Whereas in these strophes Shakespeare speaks not only of his friend but also of his own love and of his own songs, the final couplet is devoted entirely to the three virtues, which are granted an independent life through the device of personification. Yet this independent life is accorded to beauty, goodness, and fi-