

lit.

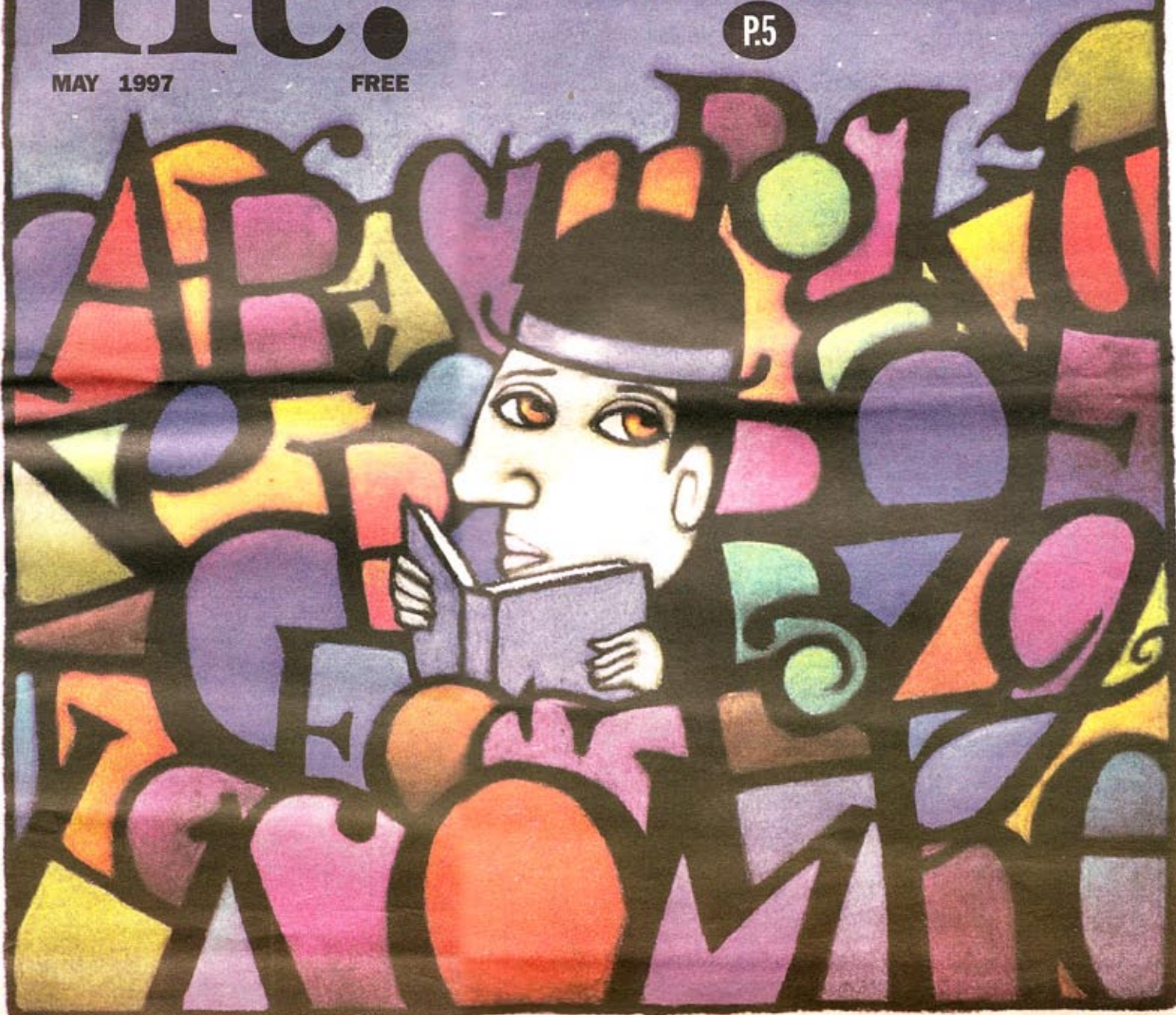
MAY 1997

FREE

Breaching the language barrier

The pleasures and pains of literature in translation

P.5



GUARDIAN ILLUSTRATION BY PHILLIP DVORAK

SEX OR NO SEX?

Susie Bright and Andrea Dworkin reviewed

P.6

BOTTOM READER

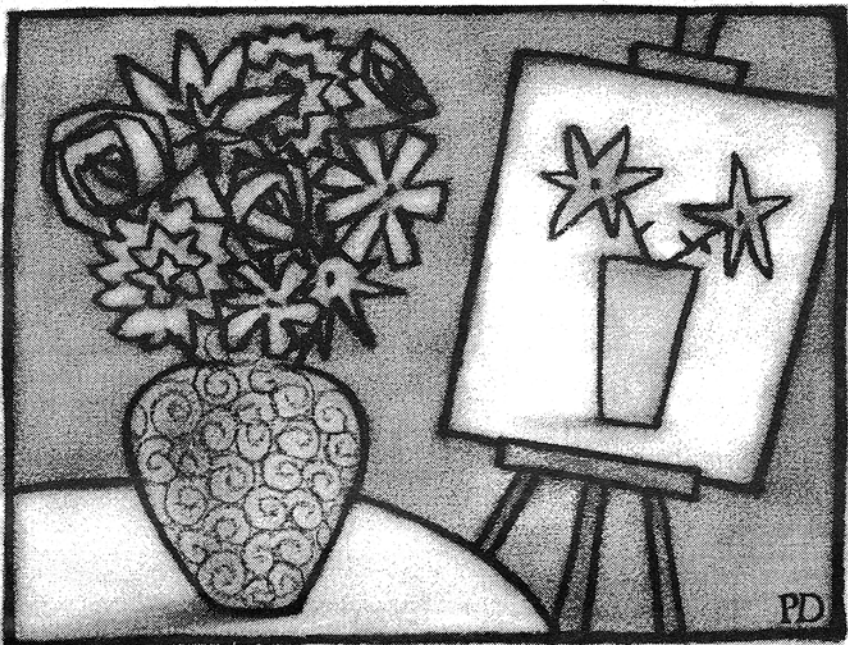
Introducing a new column on the best of the worst

P.10

GUARDIAN
A Literary Supplement

BREACHING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

The pleasures and pains of literature in translation



GUARDIAN ILLUSTRATION BY PHILLIP DVORAK

By PAUL Signorelli

CAVEAT EMPTOR (usually translated from Latin as “Let the buyer beware”) is as good advice as any that can be offered to someone who wants to read literature in translation. Beautifully written, heartrending tales from all over the world are available, and readers are often passionate about these works.

“Anything by Isabel Allende,” Book Passage president Elaine Petrocelli suggested immediately when asked to provide a list of recommendations for those looking for great translated literature. “If Allende writes it, it’s my favorite.”

Other local readers are equally enthusiastic and offer abundant recommendations, including Nobel Prize winners (Yasunori Kawabata and Pablo Neruda) and frequently cited authors ranging from Marguerite Duras and Georges Perec (France) to Julio Cortázar (Argentina) and Mariama Bâ (Senegal). (See accompanying list for additional authors.)

The pleasure of reading world literature in translation comes with a basic dilemma: How much can a translation reflect the feelings evoked by the work in its original language?

Brian Neilson, who teaches Italian at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music as well as a UC Extension Italian-language class

on the fables compiled by Italo Calvino, says, “All translations, of necessity, are a compromise between two often mutually exclusive exigencies: fidelity to the literality of words and fidelity to the literary intention of the author.”

“If we could posit the existence of an ideal translation of any given work, it is, nonetheless, a completely different beast with its own autonomous life. The ideal reader should be armed with that knowledge, that a translation is a flawed approximation.”

Novelist Terence Clarke (*The Day Nothing Happened*, *My Father in the Night*, and *The King of Rumah Nadai*) recently gained firsthand knowledge of the challenges of translating when he prepared his own as-yet-unpublished renditions of poems by Neruda and completed a novel in Spanish, which he then translated into English.

“The ultimate goal is to make it be as close, in every respect, to the original piece—and as good in English as it was in the original language. I think that’s probably an impossible goal,” he said.

Thomas Christensen, who serves as executive director and editor in chief of the San Francisco-based publishing company Mercury House and who has completed translations of works by Cortázar, Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes, and (with Carol Christensen) Laura Esquivel, cites similar challenges.

“Translators have to be close readers or critical readers,” he said. “It’s important to let the text stand on its own and let the readers form their own interpretations.”

Translations of perennial favorites (ranging from the Bible and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* and the poems of Neruda) can vary tremendously and leave a reader wondering what happened from edition to edition.

Those who translate or who frequently read translated literature are the first to admit that translation is an art rather than a science—and that plenty of bad art exists.

Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921), by Nobel Prize-winner Luigi Pirandello, offers some dramatic examples of the differences to be found among various translators’ efforts. The characters in the original Italian-language version are identified only as archetypes (such as “the father,” “the mother,” “the leading lady,” “the stage manager”) rather than by proper names. One translator, in moving the play into English, ignores Pirandello and assigns the names “Charlie” and “John” to two stagehands and moves around some of their dialogue.

The author has one of his characters say, “*Per piacere, faccia dare un po’ di luce*,” which presents a translation problem. *Faccia dare*, if rendered literally, would give the incomprehensible phrase “make to give,” and thus it requires a shift into a colloquial English expression. Three published versions provide samples of the differences to be found: “Let’s have a little light, please”; “Get us a bit of light, will you?”; and “OK, Charlie, light ‘em up.”

POLENTA VERSUS FOOD

“What I have found is that this is the disease of translators: translators who decide they are on an equal plane with the author,” Clarke told me.

That is the kind of rewriting that exists in some translations of Neruda’s work, Clarke continued. “It’s as though Neruda’s poem is

the skeletal structure and the translator’s English poem gets imposed on top of that. Neruda’s poems are straightforward, almost prosaic. This guy’s translations become florid, post-Victorian pieces that are frequently bad poetry.”

Problems can also creep into translations when the translator chooses neutral, generic terms rather than retaining the specific, colorful, image-laden words of the original language.

Taking Calvino’s fable “The Crab Prince” from Italian into English, the translator starts with a line that, in a fairly literal translation, could read, “Once there was a fisherman who wasn’t able to catch enough to buy polenta for his family.” One translator’s version of the line—“There was once a fisherman who never could catch enough fish to buy food for his family”—loses the word *polenta* and replaces it with the more nondescript *food*. Making such word choices throughout the collection of 200 fables, the translator ends up with a homogenized work that loses much of the charm and texture of the original.

“You’ve just got to have the word *polenta* in there,” Clarke said. “There’s the whole issue of how it looks, how it smells, the texture.... A lot of translators are not writers, they are not imaginative people. Someone like that doesn’t know what *polenta* means.”

“I think that’s a mistake,” Thomas Christensen agreed. Facing a similar issue when they translated Laura Esquivel’s *Like*

Continued on page 13

Around the world in 23 authors

JULES VERNE—whose work continues to be translated from French into English—suggested a voyage around the world in 80 days. Readers attempting a journey to commemorate World-in-Translation Month might go around the world with these popular, living novelists and poets in translation:

Claribel Alegria (Nicaragua) is a magic-realist poet, novelist, and essayist.

Isabel Allende (Chile), a Marin County resident, writes magic realism. **Patrick Chamoiseau**’s (Martinique) latest novel is *Texaco*.

Mahmoud Darwish (Palestine) writes poetry and nonfiction.

Thu Huong Duong (Vietnam) explores culture and politics in Vietnam.

Annie Ernaux (France) is an autobiographical novelist.

Carlos Fuentes (Mexico) explores the culture and history of Mexico.

Eduardo Galeano (Uruguay) is a novelist, journalist, and activist.

Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia) is a Nobel Prize-winning magic realist.

Günter Grass (Germany) explores social and political issues in Germany.

Peter Høeg (Denmark) examines cultures clashing in *Smilla’s Sense of Snow*.

Milan Kundera (Czech Republic) writes on love, sex, spirituality, and politics.

Naguib Mahfouz (Egypt), a Nobel Prize winner, writes on social and political issues.

Haruki Murakami (Japan) writes novels and short stories.

Cees Nooteboom (Netherlands) is a novelist and essayist.

Kenzaburo Oe (Japan) is a Nobel Prize-winning novelist.

Octavio Paz (Mexico) is a Nobel Prize-winning poet.

Amos Oz (Israel) explores culture and politics in the Middle East. **Milorad Pavic** (Serbia) is a novelist, poet, and essayist.

Susanna Tamaro’s (Italy) *Follow Your Heart* was a bestseller in Europe. **Pramoedya Ananta Toer** (Indonesia) composed the “Buru Tetralogy” while in prison.

Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru) writes magic realism.

Mo Yan (China) writes short stories and novels, including *Red Sorghum*.

Based on recommendations from booksellers and staff of A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books, Black Oak Books, Book Passage, European Book Company Inc., Green Apple Books, and the San Francisco Public Library International Languages Center, suggestions were also offered by Thomas Christensen, Terence Clarke, and Brian Neilson, who are quoted in the accompanying story.

P.S.

TRANSLATION

Continued from page 5

Water for Chocolate into English, Thomas and Carol Christensens argued with an editor who wanted to change names of the numerous Mexican food items into English.

Editors "are afraid, so they tend to try to exclude everything that seems foreign, everything that seems distant," he explained. "They don't want anything that's going to be strange or threatening to the reader." In the end, the Christensens retained the original Spanish words.

"It seemed pertinent for the flavor, which was appropriate for that book," he said. "The trend in the United States is to normalize everything and make everything as familiar and unthreatening to Americans as possible. Publishers try to disguise the fact that [the books] are translations. Their decisions are commercial decisions. Laura Esquivel's style is very plain to start with. It becomes simple, not very interesting, if you take all the flavor out of it."

Poetry—both classic and contemporary—poses particular difficulties, as translators struggle to match the rhythms and musicality of one language with those of another with quite different structures. A brochure published by Mercury House compares variations of one passage of Lao-tzu's "Taoteching."

One repeatedly sees similar variations, including "The valley spirit that doesn't die," "The valley spirit never dies," and "The spirit of the valley never dies." Other translators begin the same passage much differently: "The spiritual reality of the void never ceases to exist" or "The tendency toward opposition is ever present."

WORLD IN TRANSLATION

The optimum way to experience literature, of course, is by reading it in its original language. That's not feasible for most of us, though. In spite of the challenges of translations, readers remain excited by the possibilities of viewing other cultures through translated literature, and they face a dizzying array of contemporary and classic choices.

Of the 17 full-length reviews in the April 6, 1997, issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, for example, four were of translated works: Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk's *The New Life*, Austrian novelist-playwright-screenwriter Peter Handke's *Journey to the Rivers*, Dutch novelist Cees Nooteboom's essay collection *Roads to Santiago*, and Spanish-born novelist-poet-screenwriter Jorge Semprun's nonfiction *Literature or Life*.

Translated literature is receiving special attention in May, as events are scheduled throughout the country for the second annual World-in-Translation Month, organized through the Translation Committee of the PEN American Center.

Carol Volk of the center's Translation Committee notes that the events "bring the reading public's attention to foreign literature and the creative efforts of translators." Translators will be honored this month with awards including the PEN-Book of the Month Club prize for the best literature translation, the PEN award for poetry in translation, the Ralph Manheim Medal for lifetime achievement in translation, and the Poggioli Award for translation in progress from Italian. ■

Paul Signorelli is the director of volunteer services for the San Francisco Public Library and co-owner of Authors & Audiences.