

Ronald Huebert

## LOST IN TRANSLATION

You hear it said as self-evidently true  
Whenever a Danish poet, say,  
Takes one of those Canada Council tours.  
He'll read the English version of his work,  
And when it sounds unbearably flat  
He'll take evasive action:  
So much is lost, he'll say,  
In the translation; all the tartness  
Dissipates, the texture melts away,  
To say nothing of the tug and thrust  
Of rhythms in the mother tongue.

The opposite claim is never entertained,  
At least not that I've noticed.  
Do the program notes to *Hedda Gabler*  
Point out that Ibsen's anemic Norwegian prose  
Has been fleshed out and fortified  
In Michael Meyer's energetic translation?  
Did Chaucer indicate, when he first read  
His *Troilus*, that the Italian original  
Is morally shallow and psychologically tepid?  
I doubt it. More like him to show deference  
To *myne auctour*, and make excuses  
For an imperfect rendition.

On one such ritual occasion  
I put the question squarely to the poet:  
"You say so much is lost, but is  
Anything ever *gained* in translation?"  
He didn't see the point.

But I think I could persuade him now,  
Thanks to Madonna's Hungarian interview  
First published in the Budapest paper *Blikk*  
And rendered back, sublimely,

For English-speaking readers.  
*Blikk* asks about her sex-life, or,  
In the translator's version,  
About the men she may have been  
"Dating in her bed." Taking her distance,  
Asserting her privacy, Madonna says,  
"I am a woman and not a test-mouse."  
Undeterred, the interviewer poses  
"A question from left space":  
"What was your book *Slut* about?"  
This gets a prompt rebuke:  
"It was called *Sex*, my book."  
But *Blikk* knows better.  
"Not in Hungary. Here it was called *Slut*."

Whatever's lost in this translation,  
I am content to lose.

