

TRANSLATION OF WORLD CLASSICS

I 1. During the second part of its first Session, the General Assembly of the United Nations, recognising "that it is in the hearts and minds of men that the ultimate grounds of peace are to be found", and "considering that the highest visions of the mind are not sufficiently disseminated throughout the world", unanimously adopted a proposal directed to securing the translation into the most important languages of the classics of the whole world, and their general distribution; the Assembly afterwards referred the consideration of this project to the Economic and Social Council and to Unesco.

2. In its turn, the Economic and Social Council, during its fourth Session in March 1947, unanimously adopted the following resolution :

"THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL,
TAKING NOTE of the Resolution No.60 (1) of the General Assembly of 14 December 1946 whereby the question of the translation of the world's classics into the languages of the members of the United Nations was referred to the Economic and Social Council for reference to Unesco; and of the principles recommended therein for consideration in the study of this question;

AND CONSIDERING

(a) that the translation of the classics is a project of international concern and of great significance for the promotion of international cultural co-operation;

(b) that the successful implementation of this project is linked closely with all the activities of Unesco which tend to raise the general level of culture among the people of the world;

(c) that certain nations do not have sufficient facilities and resources for the authentic translation of numerous classics into their languages;
and

(d) that such translation is greatly conducive to their cultural development;

DECIDES TO REQUEST UNESCO to submit by 1 June 1948, to the Economic and Social Council a report giving recommendations for needed action, and including particularly data on objective methods of selection of great books, the needs of various cultural regions, and suggestions for general assistance in translation, publication and distribution".

3. For its part, the General Conference of Unesco, meeting in Paris in November and December 1946, recognised the necessity of making available good translations of the most important works of all nations in the interests of international understanding.

4. In accordance with the decisions of the General Conference and with the resolution adopted by the Economic and Social Council, the Executive Board of Unesco finally decided, at its most recent meeting, to include in Unesco's programme the project for the "translation of the Classics".

II The project, which is now being undertaken, is at present planned as follows: the first task of the Unesco Secretariat is to carry out an enquiry among the Member States of the United Nations, in order to draw up a list of world classics of all languages and all cultures, and a list of those works of which a translation is desired in various countries where they have not hitherto been sufficiently known. Four problems thus arise in succession:

1. drawing up of a list of world classics;
2. listing of the existing translations in the various languages;
3. preparation of a list of each country's needs, of the gaps to be filled, and of the works, the translation and dissemination of which must therefore be undertaken;
4. agreements on the measures to be taken to ensure in all cases the translation and dissemination of these works.

So far as the work of translation and dissemination is concerned, Unesco's part will be to co-ordinate; the operation will be financed by appropriate means, without Unesco's using its own budget.

On the basis of the results of this enquiry, and so far as replies have been received in time, a report will be submitted to the General Conference in Mexico; after the General Conference a report will also be submitted, as requested, to the Economic and Social Council.

III Naturally, it will be for each State to supply the list of works considered national classics. However, to avoid misunderstanding and too unequal a distribution, it would appear to be necessary to agree on a few common criteria.

1. Any work, whatever intellectual field it falls in (literature, philosophy, science or religion), may be deemed a "classic" if it is considered truly representative of a culture or a nation, and if it remains as a landmark in the history of human genius and in the evolution of Man towards civilisation.

2. Notwithstanding it is the expression of a particular culture, the characteristic of a classic is that it passes beyond the limits of that culture and is representative of it not only within the nation but also in the eyes of other nations.

3. "Classics" appeal to the general educated public and not only to specialists.

4. Length of life being one of the characteristics of a classic, it is generally agreed that those works be deemed classics which have stood the test of time and have preserved their human value for generations. It is thus possible to agree, on practical grounds, that only works published before 1900 shall be deemed classics. As regards more recent works, Unesco has in mind a further project for the translation and dissemination of the principal works of contemporary literature.

5. In principle, a degree of priority should be given to works likely to increase mutual understanding between nations, the feeling of human fellowship, and respect for national idiosyncrasies.

The resolution adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations and defined by the Social and Economic Council, says that steps should be taken to ensure the translation and dissemination of the classics in all Member States of the United Nations. But it is also laid down that these classics are in every language and the fruit of every culture. Therefore an enquiry should be undertaken by the most suitable means among nations which are not members of the United Nations. In particular, it would be impossible to overlook the German classics, and the necessary contacts should be made in this regard with the occupation authorities in Germany.

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All Member States of the United Nations will shortly receive a series of questionnaires concerning the list of classics, the list of works to be translated into the principal languages, those needing translation and dissemination in specified languages, and the measures required to ensure such translation and dissemination. But the Secretariat of Unesco would be glad to have as soon as practicable, if possible before 1st August 1947, an agreement in principle between Governments on the main lines of the project. As this is essentially a matter which concerns the culture of each nation, the Secretariat of Unesco would also be glad to receive from each Government, the names of institutions (national commissions, academies, universities or similar bodies) or of individual experts who might undertake the necessary correspondence with the Secretariat, and later the handling of the enquiry within each country. Furthermore, the Secretariat would like to be informed if any work has been initiated by private persons, or public institution, in connection with the general question of the translation of classics, which could be brought into the scheme of the "Translation of World Classics." These names also should be submitted before 1st August 1947, so that the Secretariat may be in a position to act as rapidly as the situation requires.

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In face of the dangers menacing civilisation, one of the most urgent duties is to awaken the spirit of understanding and mutual respect between peoples. The General Assembly of the United Nations and the General Conference of Unesco were unanimous in considering that acquaintance with the great works of the mind produced by each people was one of the most effective means of arriving at that understanding and mutual respect.

The Secretariat of Unesco hopes that the importance of this project, which was originally suggested by the Assembly of the United Nations, will not go unnoticed by Governments.

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