

## LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

# You Don't Need to Speak Another Language to Love a Bilingual Edition

Treat language as a Jenga tower, moving its pieces but preserving its structure.

By Hasan Altaf

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Language has probably always been a slippery thing, but I can't be alone in finding its current slipperiness particularly disconcerting. There is real, deliberate damage being done to words: A war becomes a "special military operation," for example. The emergence of chat-based A.I. models such as ChatGPT, meanwhile, divorces us from the process of communication as a thoughtful series of decisions about how to best make ourselves understood by others. There are always, of course, scales more modest than these. Sometimes the simplest sentiments get twisted and freighted in ways we never intended: That I could not make time for someone does not mean I do not love them; but I can't add a footnote to clarify my intentions. The possibility of truly conveying meaning to someone else — which is, after all, the whole point — begins to seem remote.

Words are nonetheless all we have, so to bolster my faith, I turn to bilingual editions. This might, as a coping mechanism, seem counterintuitive; these books approximately double the number of words you have to contend with. But when language feels as elusive as smoke — when there is so much to get across and so many traps along the way — bilingual editions make it feel solid.

I admit that these books are for me a security blanket. I grew up on them, as my parents tried to drill back into my head some semblance of the Urdu I lost as a child. Before you ask: You don't need to speak another language to appreciate a bilingual edition. The English language shape-shifts across time and space — so you could find a pocket Shakespeare, if you like, one of those editions with a contemporary gloss across the spread, and play the same game. In any case, if you can read English, everything from French to Vietnamese can be at your fingertips. If you are the kind of person who has something to say but is never quite certain how to say it, spending some time with these books might bring you, in this moment of senselessness, some hope.

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The thing to do is find a book and let it fall open. Poetry and drama work best, since they are made up of more discrete units visually defined on the page, and sometimes all it takes is an image. In “The Rebel’s Silhouette,” for example, an untitled Urdu poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz on Page 50 is placed opposite its translation, by the Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali, on Page 51. Even if you don’t read Urdu, the original is sharply outlined: four lines in two couplets, taking up barely a third of the page. On the right, the English is an entirely different creature: Faiz’s twinned couplets have been transmuted into seven-line verses, and the neat equal weights of the Urdu have been redistributed, creating imbalances that are precarious yet deliberate. The transformation is in black and white — as though the Urdu were a clay bowl that Ali has transformed into a vase. One great charm of a bilingual edition is that you don’t have to give up one for the other, as you would with a translation. You can have both at the same time, and treat language as a Jenga tower, moving its pieces but preserving its structure.

The closer you can get to both languages, of course, the more you can appreciate. In Hilda Hilst’s “Of Death. Minimal Odes,” a book from 2018 translated by Laura Cesarco Eglin, one poem begins, “*No coração, no olhar.*” For the Anglophone reader, to look over and see that what appears like the word “no” is, in Portuguese, not a negation but “in the” (“In the heart, in the gaze”), is an indicator of how much range there is — how many different ways there are to express something. Some of those go beyond the words themselves. Look at the beginning of another untitled poem and you can hear the music of “*Passará/tem passado/passa com a sua fina faca*” — the time-traveling verb, the echoing sibilants, the alliteration. Eglin has rendered the verse as, “He will pass/he has passed/he passes with his fine knife,” capturing even that doubled “f.” It’s like a song written for piano being played on the violin: the same tune in a different key, maybe; a reminder that there are so many tools at your disposal.

You could read in translation, yes, or in a foreign language. Each is a worthwhile exercise, but each presents a language in isolation, a thought pinned to the board. Bilingual editions, on the other hand, capture possibility. Consider Gabriela Mistral’s “A Woman,” translated by Randall Couch from the Spanish: “When she says ‘Aleppo pine’/she’s not saying a tree but a child.” For an inarticulate citizen of these end times, moments like this — when “*pino de Alepo*” becomes “Aleppo pine,” which becomes “a child” — are a reminder not only that the right words are there, but that while language can be abused and twisted by forces beyond me, I have access to it, too. It can be used not just to destroy meaning but to find it, create it, share it. You could say that what I’m looking for, what these books offer, is a taste of power.

**Hasan Altafis an editor at the New York Review of Books.**

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