

第十三届“沪江杯”翻译竞赛原文（英语组）

（前十二届冠名为“CASIO杯”）

The Writer in Winter

John Updike

YOUNG OR OLD, a writer sends a book into the world, not himself. There is no Senior Tour for authors, with the tees shortened by twenty yards and carts allowed. No mercy is extended by the reviewers; but, then, it is not extended to the rookie writer, either. He or she may feel, as the gray-haired scribes of the day continue to take up space and consume the oxygen in the increasingly small room of the print world, that the elderly have the edge, with their established names and already secured honors. How we did adore and envy them, the idols of our college years—Hemingway and Faulkner, Frost and Eliot, Mary McCarthy and Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty! We imagined them aswim in a heavenly refulgence, as joyful and immutable in their exalted condition as angels forever singing.

Now that I am their age—indeed, older than a number of them got to be—I can appreciate the advantages, for a writer, of youth and obscurity. You are not yet typecast. You can take a distant, cold view of the entire literary scene. You are full of your material—your family, your friends, your region of the country, your

generation—when it is fresh and seems urgently worth communicating to readers. No amount of learned skills can substitute for the feeling of having a lot to say, of *bringing news*. Memories, impressions, and emotions from your first twenty years on earth are most writers' main material; little that comes afterward is quite so rich and resonant. By the age of forty, you have probably mined the purest veins of this precious lode; after that, continued creativity is a matter of sifting the leavings. You become playful and theoretical; you invent sequels, and attempt historical novels. The novels and stories thus generated may be more polished, more ingenious, even more humane than their predecessors; but none does quite the essential earthmoving work that Hawthorne, a writer who dwelt in the shadowland “where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet,” specified when he praised the novels of Anthony Trollope as being “as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case.”

This second quotation—one writer admiring a virtue he couldn't claim—meant a lot to me when I first met it, and I have cited it before. A few images, a few memorable acquaintances, a few cherished phrases circle around the aging writer's head like gnats as he strolls through the summertime woods at gloaming. He sits down before the word processor's humming, expectant screen, facing the

strong possibility that he has already expressed what he is struggling to express again.

My word processor—a term that describes me as well—is the last of a series of instruments of self-expression that began with crayons and colored pencils held in my childish fist. My hands, somewhat grown, migrated to the keyboard of my mother’s typewriter, a portable Remington, and then, schooled in touch-typing, to my own machine, a beige Smith Corona expressly bought by loving parents for me to take to college. I graduated to an office model, on the premises of *The New Yorker*, that rose up, with an exciting heave, from the surface of a metal desk. Back in New England as a freelancer, I invested in an electric typewriter that snatched the letters from my fingertips with a sharp, premature *clack*; it held, as well as a black ribbon, a white one with which I could correct my many errors. Before long, this clever mechanism gave way to an even more highly evolved device, an early Wang word processor that did the typing itself, with a marvellous speed and infallibility. My next machine, an IBM, made the Wang seem slow and clunky and has been in turn superseded by a Dell that deals in dozens of type fonts and has a built-in spell checker. Through all this relentlessly advancing technology the same brain gropes through its diminishing neurons for images and narratives that will lift lumps

out of the earth and put them under the glass case of published print.

With ominous frequency, I can't think of the right word. I know there *is* a word; I can visualize the exact shape it occupies in the jigsaw puzzle of the English language. But the word itself, with its precise edges and unique tint of meaning, hangs on the misty rim of consciousness. Eventually, with shamefaced recourse to my well-thumbed thesaurus or to a germane encyclopedia article, I may pin the word down, only to discover that it unfortunately rhymes with the adjoining word of the sentence. Meanwhile, I have lost the rhythm and syntax of the thought I was shaping up, and the paragraph has skidded off (like this one) in an unforeseen direction.

When, against my better judgment, I glance back at my prose from twenty or thirty years ago, the quality I admire and fear to have lost is its carefree bounce, its snap, its exuberant air of slight excess. The author, in his boyish innocence, is calling, like the sorcerer's apprentice, upon unseen powers—the prodigious potential of this flexible language's vast vocabulary. Prose should have a flow, the forward momentum of a certain energized weight; it should feel like a voice tumbling into your ear.

An aging writer wonders if he has lost the ability to visualize a completed work, in its complex spatial relations. He should have in hand a provocative beginning and an ending that will feel inevitable.

Instead, he may arrive at his ending nonplussed, the arc of his intended tale lying behind him in fragments. The threads have failed to knit. The leap of faith with which every narrative begins has landed him not on a far safe shore but in the middle of the drink. The failure to make final sense is more noticeable in a writer like Agatha Christie, whose last mysteries don't quite solve all their puzzles, than in a broad-purposed visionary like Iris Murdoch, for whom puzzlement is part of the human condition. But in even the most sprawling narrative, things must add up.

The ability to fill in a design is almost athletic, requiring endurance and agility and drawing upon some of the same mental muscles that develop early in mathematicians and musicians. Though writing, being partly a function of experience, has few truly precocious practitioners, early success and burnout are a dismally familiar American pattern. The mental muscles slacken, that first freshness fades. In my own experience, diligent as I have been, the early works remain the ones I am best known by, and the ones to which my later works are unfavorably compared. Among the rivals besetting an aging writer is his younger, nimbler self, when he was the cocky new thing.

From the middle of my teens I submitted drawings, poems, and stories to *The New Yorker*; all came back with the same elegantly

terse printed rejection slip. My first break came late in my college career, when a short story that I had based on my grandmother's slow dying of Parkinson's disease was returned with a note scrawled in pencil at the bottom of the rejection slip. It read, if my failing memory serves: "Look—we don't use stories of senility, but try us again."

Now "stories of senility" are about the only ones I have to tell. My only new experience is of aging, and not even the aged much want to read about it. We want to read, judging from the fiction that is printed, about life in full tide, in love or at war—bulletins from the active battlefields, the wretched childhoods, the poignant courtships, the fraught adulteries, the big deals, the scandals, the crises of sexually and professionally active adults. My first published novel was about old people; my hero was a ninety-year-old man. Having lived as a child with aging grandparents, I imagined old age with more vigor, color, and curiosity than I could bring to a description of it now.

I don't mean to complain. Old age treats free-lance writers pretty gently. There is no compulsory retirement at the office, and no athletic injuries signal that the game is over for good. Even with modern conditioning, a ballplayer can't stretch his career much past forty, and at the same age an actress must yield the romantic lead to

a younger woman. A writer's fan base, unlike that of a rock star, is post-adolescent, and relatively tolerant of time's scars; it distressed me to read of some teenager who, subjected to the Rolling Stones' halftime entertainment at a recent Super Bowl, wondered why that skinny old man (Mick Jagger) kept taking his shirt off and jumping around. The literary critics who coped with Hemingway's later, bare-chested novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* asked much the same thing.

By and large, time moves with merciful slowness in the old-fashioned world of writing. The eighty-eight-year-old Doris Lessing won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Elmore Leonard and P. D. James continue, into their eighties, to produce best-selling thrillers. Although books circulate ever more swiftly through the bookstores and back to the publisher again, the rhythms of readers are leisurely. They spread recommendations by word of mouth and "get around" to titles and authors years after making a mental note of them. A movie has a few weeks to find its audience, and television shows flit by in an hour, but books physically endure, in public and private libraries, for generations. Buried reputations, like Melville's, resurface in academia; avant-garde worthies such as Cormac McCarthy attain, late in life, best-seller lists and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

A pervasive unpredictability lends hope to even the most superannuated competitor in the literary field. There is more than one measurement of success. A slender poetry volume selling fewer than a thousand copies and receiving a handful of admiring reviews can give its author a pride and sense of achievement denied more mercenary producers of the written word. As for bad reviews and poor sales, they can be dismissed on the irrefutable hypothesis that reviewers and book buyers are too obtuse to appreciate true excellence. Over time, many books quickly bloom and then vanish; a precious few unfold, petal by petal, and become classics.

An aging writer has the not insignificant satisfaction of a shelf of books behind him that, as they wait for their ideal readers to discover them, will outlast him for a while. The pleasures, for him, of bookmaking—the first flush of inspiration, the patient months of research and plotting, the laserprinted final draft, the back-and-forthing with Big Apple publishers, the sample pages, the jacket sketches, the proofs, and at last the boxes from the printers, with their sweet heft and smell of binding glue—remain, and retain creation's giddy bliss. Among those diminishing neurons there lurks the irrational hope that the last book might be the best.