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Ilan Stavans is the Lewis-Sebring Professor of Latin American and Latino Culture and Five-College 40th Anniversary Distinguished Professor at Amherst College. He is also Professor of Creative Writing at Columbia University. His books include the best-selling *The Hispanic Condition* (1995), *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (2001), and *Dictionary Days: A Defining Passion* (2005). He is also the editor of *The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories* (1998), *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* (2003), the 3-volume set of Isaac Bashevis Singer: *Collected Stories* (2004), *The Schocken Book of Modern Sephardic Literature* (2005), and the 4-volume *Encyclopedia Latina* (Grolier/Scholastic), the first reference book to comprehensively address every aspect of Hispanic life in the United States. In November, Penguin Classics will bring out his anthology *Rubén Darío: Selected Writings*.

Stavans has been called by the *New York Times* "the czar of Latino culture in the United States" and the *Washington Post* has described him as "Latin America's liveliest and boldest critic and most innovative cultural enthusiast." The *San Francisco Chronicle* said: "Ilan Stavans may very well succeed

On Censorship:

A Conversation with Ilan Stavans

Verónica Albin

VA: What is censorship?

IS: To deliberately expurgate material for specific reasons. Ironically, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists divergent definitions for the word "censor," one historical, the other consuetudinary: "the title of two magistrates in ancient Rome, who drew up the register or census of the citizens, etc., and had the supervision of public morals"; and "one who exercises official or officious supervision over morals and conduct."

VA: An ancient practice...

IS: Although one easily misunderstood. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of the people peacefully to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

In the democratic world, this maxim has become a touchstone, one that not every society is able to handle. Voltaire once famously said: "I disagree with everything you say—but will fight to the death for your right to say it." Not to allow others to disagree, to be intolerant of opinions different from ours, constitutes censorship. On the other hand, the late U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes stated: "Freedom of speech does not include the liberty to shout FIRE! in a crowded theater." In other words, words have echoes: they carry consequences. And people are responsible for those consequences. Not to be allowed to cry FIRE! in a crowded theater, is that censorship? Not quite, although it does impose limitations on freedom.

Censorship is the cry-wolf of modern political debates. The liberal world wants people to believe that censorship is extant where tyranny prevails. This sentiment is traceable to the Enlightenment, which fought for individual freedom. Voltaire, Diderot, and, in general the French Encyclopedists, fought against the obscurantism of medieval times. Their quest was for equality, justice, and freedom for all. But the dreams of the Enlightenment in France, England, Germany, and the United States, were never fully realized. Censorship is a feature of every hierarchy—be it capitalist, communist, democratic, etc.—where a few are in control of the information. So the question never is "Is there censorship here?" but "what kind of censorship is to be found here?"

VA: And there is also self-censorship.

IS: No act of human communication is ever, in any way, free of some degree of control, restriction, and even, yes, the suppression of information. In our daily interactions—with friends and family, for instance—we ponder the consequences of our words. An average stream of consciousness might be: "If I say 'I love you,' will she reciprocate? Maybe she won't, not so soon at least. After all, we've only seen each other a couple of times." This type of self-imposed limitation is, somehow, a form of self-censorship. Each of us is born with an inherent mechanism that calibrates our interaction with society.

VA: I sense a pessimistic tone in your statement.

IS: I read somewhere that the difference between an optimist and a pessimist is that the

in becoming the Octavio Paz of our age."

The recipient of numerous honors—including an Emmy nomination, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Latino Literature Prize, the Antonia Pantoja Award, and Chile's Presidential Medal—he is the host of the PBS show *La Plaza: Conversations with Ilan Stavans*. (University of Arizona Press published a companion book.) He is also a regular contributor to newspapers in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. His work has been translated into a dozen languages. Routledge published *The Essential Ilan Stavans* in 2000 and the University of Wisconsin Press released *Ilan Stavans: Eight Conversations by Neal Sokol* in 2004.

As a descendant of Eastern European Jews who settled in Mexico, Stavans grew up in a multilingual environment. As he describes it in *On Borrowed Words*, Yiddish and Spanish were his first languages. He draws from his rich background in his decade-long study of Spanglish, the hybrid tongue spoken by millions of Latinos in the United States. Stavans has collected some 6,000 Spanglish terms and explored the socio-linguistic history of this vehicle of communication in his controversial book *Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language*, which has been at the heart of a heated debate in the Hispanic world. The volume was awarded the Latino Hall of Fame award in 2004 for best reference book. In the last chapter, Stavans offers a translation into Spanglish of the first chapter of *Don Quixote de La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes.

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optimist hopes ours is the best of all possible universes while the pessimist knows it is.

VA: What are the earliest most visible examples of censorship?

IS: Again, the discussion of censorship is a byproduct of the Enlightenment. The French Revolution gave us the vocabulary. Once we made it our own, of course, it is possible to look back in time and find benchmarks in the history of censorship that make this a practice as old as humankind. The Bible has a plethora of cases. Cain misinforms G-d about Abel's true fate. The news about Joseph's fate reaches Jacob in oblique fashion. In Greece, Socrates is the ultimate martyr to censorship. Indeed, it strikes me as ironic that this most open-minded of philosophers is remembered not through his own words, but through those of his authoritarian student Plato. Isn't that a perverse historical twist? In the Far East, the examples are copious. Emperor Shih Huang Ti of China is known for his barbaric colonial enterprises. He ordered the building of the Great Wall of China, which would protect his people from invading armies. But in the year 213 BCE, through his first minister Li Si, he also ordered the destruction of every single book in the kingdom—except those on medicine, agriculture, pharmacy, and fortune-telling. These parallel efforts have struck many as diabolic: geographically, Shih Huang Ti closed his domain to outside influences; chronologically, he sought to start the paths of history with himself. Not casually, the emperor thought of his person as "the first, the auspicious, the godlike." Sigmund Freud once suggested that proof of human progress is that books and not people are burnt at the stake today. His view is disingenuous, of course. True, the *autos-da-fé* by the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Seville in the 15th century are no longer in store. But exile, imprisonment, torture, and death of dissidents is a common practice around the world. As for the burning of books, if that is a thermometer of the cultural malaise, the patient's illness is as threatening as it has always been. Books were burnt in the Hellenistic period and they still are in the present, from *Krystallnacht* to Kansas City in 1996. When it isn't burning per se, it is simply banning. Think of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, and *Harry Potter* ... the list is long, and, unfortunately, still being updated today. And if it isn't books, it is other artifacts: songs, plays, movies, videos, DVDs. Or else, it is people themselves. To die for one's ideals is the ultimate sacrifice, of course. What censors never understand is that people might be killed but not ideals.

VA: What kind of person accepts the job of censor?

IS: The Russians have a delightful word: "apparatchik." It isn't quite a bureaucrat, nor is it a self-loathing individual. Some would argue, of course, that under certain circumstances everyone is capable of becoming a censor. I thoroughly disagree. This, in my mind, is a type of personality easily compelled to be a sell-out, to become mediocre. Eduardo Galeano has a memorable paragraph on the chain reaction I would describe as "the art of acquiescence" in modern society. It is part of an essay called "Cemetery of Words." It reads:

The system that programmes the computer that alarms the banker who alerts the ambassador who dines with the general who summons the president who informs the minister who threatens the managing director who humiliates the manager who shouts at the boss who harasses the white-collar worker who despises the manual worker who ill-treats his wife who hits the child who kicks the dog.

This is what mediocrity is about: to hide behind someone else's actions.

VA: Translators are also said to "hide behind someone else's actions."

IS: Translators and censors no doubt have elements in common. And they have also shared objectives, I hasten to say. I don't say this with any animosity. On the contrary, it could be said that I'm obsessed with the art of translation. In the scale of intellectual endeavors, translators have my highest esteem. Still, translators have been used by tyrannical regimes to quietly expurgate works of material considered indecent or subversive by those in power. Yes, in the troubled history of human sins, translators are not automatically exonerated. They belong in Dante's Ninth Circle of Hell, reserved for sinners of malice and inconsistency.

VA: I shall return to that topic shortly. But first, one often connects censorship with the intransigence of fanaticism.

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by Verónica Albin

IS: To fanatical regimes and institutions, I would say. Religion often plays a lead role in the shaping of the intransigent mentality. The act of consolidating a faith involves defining others as heretical. In that sense, St. Paul is among the earliest censors in the history of Western Civilization. The Roman Catholic Indexes of the 16th and later centuries were justified by Paul's initiation of clerical bowdlerization. There are hundreds of illustrated covers displaying Pauline converts destroying books. The long papal succession is the one in charge of making the Catholic Church coalesce as an institution by refuting and antagonizing others. Gregory IX, for instance, was the first Catholic leader to officially forbid the *Talmud*, describing it as a piece of Jewish propaganda. Keep in mind that the Babylonian and Palestinian versions were only available in the original Aramaic. In other words, censorship doesn't imply direct access to the banned source. It is enough to typecast it as dangerous to seek its elimination.

VA: Whenever I read the titles in the Indexes of forbidden books issued by the Catholic Church, I can't help but smile. The first Spanish one is called *Index librorum qui prohibendur* (Valdés, 1559) but soon enough the censors start competing with "new and improved" products and go from the simple *Index* to *Novus Index librorum prohibitorum et expurgatorum* (Zapata, 1632) to *Novissimus librorum prohibitorum et expurgatorum Index* (Sotomayor, 1640). I do not smile, however, when I read their contents.

IS: The Indexes gave access to unauthorized titles. They also listed burnable books. It always astonishes me how punctilious censors are. It is never enough to seek the eradication of the forbidden fruit. Equally, if not more, important is the detailed description of it, and what makes it so undesirable. They often sought the prohibition of a book from mass consumption, which doesn't mean that the educated elite—or at least the censors themselves—couldn't read them.

VA: This brings to mind the secret libraries available without restriction to the elite and the censors such as *L'Enfer*, modeled on a purported similar library in the Vatican, and that of the British Museum: the Private Case collection.

IS: Yes, *L'Enfer*, literally "The Hell," established in 1791, is the collection of obscene, suppressed, and otherwise forbidden books held by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The collection was in a shambles and lost many volumes to pilfering until it was catalogued by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1913. It is estimated to contain around 4,000 volumes. The Private Case collection of the British Museum, located in Bloomsbury, London, until 1998 when it moved to the St. Pancras building, at one time was said to number 20,000 tomes, although theft, vandalism, and other causes have reduced it to somewhere between 1,800 and 5,000 erotic, indecent, obscene, and pornographic volumes, depending on who's counting. It includes material published over more than three centuries in England, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, the Low Countries... and it even includes works in Latin. The Private Case holdings surpass, both in quality and scope, similar "restricted" collections such as The Hell, those of the Library of Congress in Washington, and the Bodleian at Oxford and, yes, some say it even bests the Vatican's own very vast holdings on erotica, blasphemy, and freemasonry, among other risqué topics. This said, it should be mentioned that the Dominican priest, Father Leonard Boyle O.P., retired Prefect (chief librarian) of the Vatican Apostolic Library denied to his death in 1999 that the Vatican has ever held such a collection. In addition, Gershon Legman, a prominent student of erotica who helped compile a bibliography of porn for Alfred Kinsey, has stated that the Vatican doesn't have any really erotic books, claiming that the raciest are some fairly tame volumes from the classical era such as a copy of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* filled with Latin poetry, and Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*. The Vatican Library is rarely opened to scholars, and the few that are permitted to cross its threshold are carefully screened, monitored, and given restricted access to very specific materials, so we might never know what its stacks really hold under lock and key. But as for the two other large European erotica holdings, while *L'Enfer* remains closed to this day to all but researchers with special permits, in 1963 it was announced that the Private Case, with its pressmarks "P.C." and "Cup." (for the "Cupboard")—up to this point available only to library staff and those with contacts in high places—would be gradually transferred into the General Catalog. By 1965 this was done, although, from what I know, the readers of books pressmarked "P.C." and "Cup." are still required to sit at a special table.

VA: You mentioned the prohibition against the *Talmud*. Why was Judaism such a threat to the Catholic Church?

IS: St. Augustine is clear on this matter. The sheer existence of Jews is proof of the

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passion of Jesus Christ. Jews should be vilified, even attacked, but never killed, for this would deprive future generations of the proof itself. The controversy on *la limpieza de sangre*, purity of blood, in Spain from the 15th to the 16th centuries, emphasized lineage as proof of authenticity. What wasn't pure wasn't authentic. Those outside the realm were considered undesirable, their intellectual contribution questioned. The journey of thinkers and poets in medieval Spain who descended from Jewish families, such as Santa Teresa de Jesús, Juan Luis Vives, Gil Vicente, and Fray Luis de León, to name but a few, is replete with censoring episodes. But people with less "suspicious" ancestry are also emblematic. Take the case of the Salamanca grammarian, Antonio de Nebrija, who was free from the Jewish stigma but was nonetheless censored by virtue of being an intellectual.

VA: You discuss him frequently in your work, from *Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language* (2003) to *Dictionary Days: A Defining Passion* (2005).

IS: In 1470, having spent a decade studying in Bologna, Nebrija returned to Spain, and, while teaching at Salamanca from 1473 to 1486, he wrote a series of fifty commentaries on the Holy Scriptures. Rumors of apostasy began to circulate. Diego de Deza, bishop of Palencia and Salamanca and still Grand Inquisitor, became concerned. Maybe that is why Nebrija abandoned his teaching post and embarked on the study of lexicography, for which, of course, he became known posthumously. Still, in 1505 he finished his commentaries, at which time Deza, by now an archbishop, had the manuscript confiscated. This is a portion of a letter from Nebrija to Cardinal Cisneros. It is an extraordinary plea for intellectual freedom. He describes Spain as a country suffocated by mediocrity:

Me llaman temerario porque con sólo el arte de Gramática me meto por las demás artes y disciplinas no como tráfuga, sino como explorador y centinela para ver lo que hace cada uno con su profesión. Lo que hice antes con la medicina y con el derecho civil, eso mismo quiero hacer ahora con las letras sagradas, protestando que no saldré fuera de mi jurisdicción.

[They say I'm rash because availing myself only of the Grammarian's art I venture into other arts and disciplines, not as a rogue, but rather as an explorer and sentry to see what each one is doing in his own profession. What I did before with medicine and civil law, I wish to do as well with sacred texts, and I shall do so with the promise of never infringing upon the borders of my domain.] Trans: VA

The tone reminds me of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's brave "Response to Sor Filotea," another lucid manifesto against ecclesiastical censorship. In the same epistle Nebrija adds:

¿Qué si no será el mío que no sé pensar sino cosas difíciles, ni acometer sino arduas, ni publicar sino las que me dan más disgustos? Si me acomodara a la actitud de mis amigos y empleara mis vigias en las fábulas y ficciones de los poetas, si me dedicara a escribir historias y, como dice el poeta, todo lo viera de color de rosas, me querrían bien, me alabarían, me darían mil parabienes. Pero como investigo en la tierra aquellas cosas cuyo conocimiento persevera en el cielo, me llaman temerario, sacrílego y falsario, y no falta nada para que me hagan comparecer ante los jueces cargado de cadenas...¿Qué hacer en un país donde se premia a los que corrompen las Sagradas Letras y, al contrario, los que corrigen lo defectuoso, restituyen lo falsificado y enmiendan lo falso y erróneo, se ven infamados y anatémizados y aun condenados a muerte indigna si tratan de defender su manera de pensar? [...] ¿He de decir a la fuerza que no sé lo que sé? ¿Qué esclavitud o qué poder es éste tan despótico? ¿Qué digo decir? Ni escribirlo encerrado entre cuatro paredes, ni murmurarlo en voz baja en un agujero de la pared, ni pensarlo a solas te permiten".

(Quoted from F. Olmedo, *Nebrija, debelador de la barbarie*. Madrid, Editora Nacional, 1942.)

[It is but my lot in life to be incapable of thinking except of difficult

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things, nor do but difficult ones, nor publish except those that are most aggravating? If I were to conform to my friends' attitude and spent my late-night vigils immersed in fables or in the imaginings of poets, if I were to devote myself to writing stories, and, as the poet says, see everything through a rose-colored glass, they would like me well enough, they would praise me, they would congratulate me a thousand times. But since on this Earth I investigate those things known only in Heaven, they say I'm rash, sacrilegious, and mendacious and it would take but little else to make me appear before the judges weighted down with chains... What is one to do in a country where those who corrupt the Holy Texts get rewarded and those, those who mend what is flawed, restore truth to the falsehoods and amend what is false and what is wrong are defamed and anathematized and even condemned to ignominious death if they attempt to defend their ideas? [...] Must I be forced to say that I do not know what I know? What slavery or what power is this one so tyrannical? What is there to say? Writing down one's thoughts confined by four walls, whispering them to a hole in the wall, or thinking about them inside one's head, even that they forbid.] Trans: VA

Cardinal Cisneros eventually sided with Nebrija, to whom he awarded a job in Alcalá de Henares.

VA: The same zealotry one finds in the Catholic Church is traceable to totalitarian regimes. This is because a dictatorship only accepts a single version of the truth. Everything else is anathema.

IS: There is Fidel Castro's famous sentence: "*O con la revolución, o en su contra*" either you're with the revolution, or you're against it. Needless to say, it is, in spirit, the same Manichaeon line delivered to foreign governments by George W. Bush shortly after 9/11: either you're with us, or you're with the terrorists." George Lucas inserted a version of it in the third installment of the *Star Wars* saga: *Revenge of the Sith*. One of the most celebrated dissidents in Castro's Cuba was the poet Heberto Padilla. I'm fond of one of his poems, entitled "Instructions on how to enter a new society":

One: be an optimist.

Two: be discreet, correct, obedient.

(Do well at sports—all of them.)

And, most of all, move

like all the other members:

one step forward, and

one (or two) steps back:

but never stop cheering.

Padilla, you might remember, was at the heart of an intellectual scandal, the so-called "Padilla Affair." Just like the protagonist of Arthur Koestler's anti-tyranny novel *Darkness at Noon*, he was forced to publicly confess to crimes he might not have committed. This prompted an international uproar that made Jean-Paul Sartre, Alberto Moravia, Octavio Paz, and Susan Sontag, among others, break with the Cuban Revolution. Ironically, his poem is as accurate a description of life under Communism as it is in a Capitalist society.

I want to return to the topic of translation. It is often the case that translators living in restrictive environments, such as Franco's Spain and Hitler's Germany, work with texts originated in less restrictive settings and have to conform to authority. However, translators have also been known to subvert the status quo while working within a restrictive environment in an effort to be read unequivocally in a less restrictive one. In "*La traducción des textes déjà censurés*," Teresa Tomaszewicz explains that Pope John Paul II self-censored the homilies he prepared for his first visit to then communist Poland. Polish translators working with foreign journalists wished to give non-native speakers full access to the meaning of the Pope's multi-layered, and subversive, source language texts understood fully only by Polish speakers.

Yet censorship is alive and well in America. When Michael Moore was seeking a distributor in the United States for his documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Republicans looked for ways to make its journey to the local theaters an impossible one. Likewise, conservative pundits regularly complain that the liberal media doesn't allow room for their opinions. This debate about censorship takes place under the watchful eye of Congress, the Senate, and the U.S. Supreme Court.

VA: In the essay "Ink, Inc.," included in *Dictionary Days*, you talk about another censoring force: the corporate environment.

IS: That, to me, is by far the most noxious. Enter a Barnes & Noble anywhere in America and what do you find? An overabundance of books. The staff hardly knows what's in stock. The so-called hot items are shoved down people's throats while more refined books are hidden from view. And when these books are showcased—say *Wuthering Heights*, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and *Pride and Prejudice*—they are marketed as disposable items. A trip to my local mega-store usually drives me out of my mind.

VA: There is also the complaint that foreign literature doesn't find its way to American readers.

IS: It surely doesn't. Publishers often excuse themselves by saying that the United States is an insular nation, one allergic to outside forces. There is truth to this but it doesn't justify the trepidation in investing in non-English-speaking authors. Germany and Israel are models in this respect—the number of books translated in these countries is astonishingly high. For instance, how many books in Arabic were translated into English by New York publishers in 2004? Three.

VA: Should the dearth of foreign novels released in English translation by publishers in the United States be considered a form of censorship?

IS: Absolutely. And an endorsement of parochialism, too. New York publishers excuse themselves by saying that such books don't sell. Is it because Americans aren't interested in what goes on in the rest of the world? Maybe. But isn't the curse of an empire to decline and fall as a result of its narcissism? Either way, the lack of foreign novels available constitutes an endorsement of collective blindness.

VA: How about Spain?

IS: It fares better than the U.S. Ironically, authors from other Spanish-speaking countries, from Argentina to Peru, from Colombia to Mexico, regularly complain that their books aren't available in the Iberian Peninsula. So is the colonial structure still in place? By the way, the worst record in terms of censorship-cum-publishing in the Americas is held by Cuba.

VA: It's understandable.

IS: And regrettable, too.

VA: On the issue of Cuba, the translator Esther Allen, in an essay called "Doors, Windows and the Office of Foreign Assets Control," says that when she embarked on the translation of Alejo Carpentier's only work that remained untranslated into English, the brief piece "*La ciudad de las columnas*," she didn't realize she was embarking on an illegal activity, since Cuba is an embargoed country.

IS: Similarly, when I edited *The Oxford Book of Latin American Essays*, I commissioned a translation of a piece about Josephine Baker in Cuba by Nicolás Guillén. When time came to request permission from the Cuban government agency responsible for such projects, the ordeal I went through was nothing short of Kafkaesque. They required an exorbitant amount of money and wanted a difficult-to-comply-with contract. That's what ends up happening when literature is left to the state to handle: a sorrowful act.

On the subject of translation and censorship, one should recognize that, at heart, they are moved by the same rationale—to make pertinent material available to readers in a fashion suitable to the taste of an individual or elite. Both are gatekeepers who stand at key control points and rule over what gets in and what stays out of any given cultural or linguistic territory. Obviously, there are innumerable cases of translators whose job it becomes to restrict and suppress information. All cases are ideologically charged. Think of the translations into various European tongues of the *Nights*, also known as *The Book of the Thousand and One Nights* as well as *The Thousand Nights and One Night*. It is

universally acknowledged that the rather pedestrian original is filled with flying carpets, marvels, and talismans. The English, French, German, and even Spanish versions, done predominantly in the 19th century and early parts of the 20th, infused the text with a stylistic sophistication unrecognizable to the original Arabic, Farsi, or Hindi readers. But the transgressions go farther. Captain Richard Francis Burton and Edward Lane inserted episodes of their own invention in the English editions—from the ones on Aladdin to those of Abu al-Hassan and the forty thieves. Their Victorian prudishness also made them eliminate what they believed to be sexually explicit fragments. Similar devices were implemented by Galland in French and Littman in German. Obviously, it wasn't carelessness what prompted them to act. It was overzealousness. The *Arabian Nights* is only one example in a long history of egregious abuses by translators.

VA: How about cases of so-called "permitted" dissent?

IS: Every totalitarian system incorporates forms of self-immolation. The Catholic Church invites people to repent through confession, Mao Zedong encouraged children during the Cultural Revolution to denounce "non-revolutionary behavior," fascism forced people to sacrifice their needs in favor of a nationalistic ideal. Yet these systems behave according to cycles. At times they allow for some openness and elasticity only to retrench to more rigid mores. Dissent is at times encouraged, then curtailed. The reason has to do with internal tension: total subjugation is impossible, just as complete freedom is unattainable. In Cuba in the 18th century, once a year—on the occasion of a carnival—black slaves were allowed to curse the Spanish rulers and even throw eggs and tomatoes at government buildings while their owners were conveniently on vacation. Psychologically, the value of such release of frustration is incommensurable.

VA: You've written a powerful essay on the role of translation during the conquest of the Americas. It was collected in your book *The Essential Ilan Stavans* (2000). In the context of colonization, how are native translators linked to the power structures?

IS: During the conquest of Mexico and Peru translators played a major role. They served as conduits between the two clashing civilizations. The myth of La Malinche also portrays some of them as traitors. As you know, Doña Marina, as she is known in Spanish, became Hernán Cortés's interpreter and mistress. Sex, power, and words...

VA: Talking about La Malinche, I want to pursue, albeit briefly, the issue of gender. In 1603, John Florio, the English translator of Montaigne, inexorably linked translation and the status of women by claiming that since translations are always flawed, they were well suited to be done by females. What can you tell us about the female presence in literary translation?

IS: There are exemplary cases of female translators. In the English language realm, think, for instance, of Mary Herbert (1561-1621), translator of Petrarch's *Triumph of Death* and Philip Sidney's sister, Jane Lumley (1537-76), translator of Euripides's *Iphigenia*; and Margaret More Roper (1505-44), daughter of Sir Thomas More and translator of Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Precatio Dominica*. Erasmus considered her the "ornament of Britain." Anne Bacon (?-1610), mother of Francis Bacon, was a translator, too. The list is emphatically shorter than the one devoted to male translators, simply because the humanities from the Hellenistic period until the early half of the 20th century were the territory of males.

VA: I wonder if censorship in a multilingual nation where several tongues are used (India and Luxemburg, for instance) is different from one in a monolingual one (say Poland and Hungary).

IS: My instinct is to say that polyglotism allows for more openness.

VA: You mentioned *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. When the novel went on trial, Lawrence argued that to return to Chaucer is to return to innocence, that time before the fall where the excremental taboo had not yet sullied the mind; a return to those times before taboos on the representation of sex, where things could be called by their true names. Is *Lady Chatterley's Lover* an innocent novel?

IS: There are no innocent novels. Innocence is not an attribute of the novel as a literary genre. Indeed, I believe the novel is about the end of innocence.

VA: But conservative thinkers, taking on the role of *custos morum*, argue that censorship is necessary to protect our children's innocence.

IS: How does one protect someone's innocence—by blinding them to what surrounds them? Children are not innocent; they are extremely curious and inquisitive, and find their way in the world. It is our duty as adults to grant the necessary tools for them to understand that world as best as possible.

VA: On the dangers of fiction, on March 2005, the Archbishop of Genoa, Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone, who until two years ago was a member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, broke the Vatican's silence on *The Da Vinci Code*. He told Vatican Radio that no one should read it and Catholic bookstores should stop selling it. And in remarks to *// Giornale*, a conservative newspaper, Bertone stated that the book "aims to discredit the Church and its history through gross and absurd manipulations." Cardinal Bertone's chief worry, as stated, was that "there is a very real risk that many people who read it will believe that the fables it contains are true." What do you make of Bertone's comments about the nature of fiction?

IS: Fiction is, by definition, a lie. As a society, we pay novelists to lie for us, i.e., to build engaging plots out of the stuff of dreams. Why is fiction the favorite genre of the bourgeoisie? The answer is easy: it's a class infatuated with its own dreams. The statement by Cardinal Bertone isn't without precedent, though. In colonial Latin America, up until late in the 19th century, novels were forbidden from circulation. The crime? Potentially inciting the masses to entertain unacceptable ideas. Fiction has always been understood to have a double edge—it allows for an escape from routine and it also showcases the possibilities of freedom.

VA: You also talked briefly about pornography. What is the difference between pornography and obscenity?

IS: The *OED* refuses to define the word "obscenity." Instead, it offers the following synonyms: impurity, indecency, lewdness (especially of language). "Pornography," on the other hand, is described—prudishly—as the "description of the life, manners, etc., of prostitutes and their patrons; hence, the expression or suggestion of obscene or unchaste subjects in literature or art." I'm struck by the social changes experienced from the time, in the early 20th century, when the Oxford dons compiled this definition, to the present. Nowadays pornography is hardly limited to the realm of pimps and whores. Actually, the word has become politically charged—a taboo of sorts. Is pornography beyond freedom of speech? May one not scream FIRE! in a crowded theater but be allowed to accuse others of lewd behavior? Has tolerance gone too far allowing a type of sexual explicitness that is offensive? The mantra of the marketplace, of course, is simple: if it sells, it ought to be manufactured.

VA: In 1853, in Manheim, Germany, the statue of the *Venus de Milo* was tried in court for her nudity—and was convicted and condemned. Almost a hundred years later, in December of 1952, the Cyprus Tourist Office used the figure on posters it sent to Kuwait, hoping to attract Arab tourists. Sheik Abdullah al Salim al Sebah banned them. It wasn't the nudity that was problematic, it seems, for it offended no one. The problem was the lack of arms on the fair maiden. Under Islamic law, recidivist thieves have their hands cut off, and the Kuwaitis, seeing the armless statue—Sheik Abdullah surmised—might assume that all Cypriot girls were hardened criminals.

IS: A lovely example of counter-censorship. But I want to offer you another one. A while ago I referred to the *Talmud*. How does the compiler of the *Talmud* deal with apostasy? Through silence. One of the most intriguing cases of heresy in rabbinical Judaism is that of Elisha ben Avuyah, who lived in Palestine approximately between 70 and 135 CE. Ben Avuyah was a friend of Rabbi Akiva. What was his sin? He was obsessed with Greek philosophy, eventually losing his faith in the Almighty. The *Talmud* includes only a minimal amount of information about him. In the rare occasions where he is mentioned, he is described as an *Acher*: the other. Silence, needless to say, is also what publishers and translators embrace when facing a difficult challenge.

VA: Similarly, during the nearly four decades that Spain was ruled by General Francisco Franco—from 1936 to 1975—cultural manifestations were closely monitored and controlled by the Fascist military authority as well as by the Church. A salient characteristic of this span of time is that it was long enough to allow for the creation of new ways of receiving imported texts, and, more important, for the manipulation in a certain direction of the publishing industry in the Iberian Peninsula, favoring certain authors and certain types of literary production over others.

IS: The strategy was to divert attention by translating works that were ideologically "clean," whose plots and settings were both mentally and physically distant, e.g., far-West novels, spy novels, sci-fi stories, etc. It's an old technique: Keep the populace in a state of somnolence by feeding it only with what's irrelevant. Sports, for instance.

VA: In April 2005, Representative Gerald Allen, a Republican from Alabama, drafted a bill that would have barred any gay writers and playwrights—and books or plays with homosexual characters—from Alabama public schools and libraries, and state-funded universities. Which banned books, plays, or authors under the Allen bill would you consider going to war for, Ilan?

IS: Representative Allen forgets the allure of the forbidden. We're curious about what we can't get. My prediction is that gay literature will become immensely popular in Alabama as a result of his foolish effort. In any case, war isn't the solution. My response would be to challenge his bill under the premise of First-Amendment rights.

VA: When he was England's Poet Laureate, John Dryden said in his preface to his version of the *Aeneid*. "I have endeavoured to make Virgil speak such English as he would himself have spoken, if he had been born in England, and in this present Age." In Lawrence Venuti's words: "A skeptic might well wonder why Virgil should come back as Dryden instead of an epic poet who lived in the same period and wrote his epic without rhyme: John Milton. Should we not expect an English Virgil to be more attracted to the grand style of *Paradise Lost*?"

IS: I have almost twenty different translations of *Don Quixote* into Shakespeare's tongue, from the earliest one published when the second part of Cervantes's masterpiece, released in 1615, had not yet appeared, to the most recent by Edith Grossman, published in 2003. The various translators have taken the liberty of adapting the adventures of the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance and his loyal servant as they see fit. They've eliminated segments and expanded others. Equally important has been the effort to "update" the Spanish of the early parts of the 17th century to whatever period the translator deems appropriate. And so, Grossman, for instance, doesn't take the contemporary reader back to Cervantes's time. That would make her effort unappealing. Since in her view Cervantes wrote with ease and accessibility in 1605, her strategy has been to make her *Quixote* easy and accessible today by using an average lexicon. Should we not expect an English knight to be more attracted to the so-called Golden Age of Spain in the period of the defeat of the Invincible Armada, just like we would expect an English Virgil to be more suitable to the grand style of *Paradise Lost*? The response is yes and no. It all depends on what the translator seeks to achieve. Does he want us to travel back to the author's time or does he instead want the author to travel to the present day? Interestingly, I just finished editing a volume for Penguin Classics called *Rubén Darío: Selected Writings*. It is the most comprehensive anthology of the Nicaraguan poet's oeuvre in English. The section of poetry was translated by Greg Simon and Steven White, and they chose to bring Darío's poetry to the present. The prose, on the other hand, was translated by Andrew Hurley. He used somewhat stilted end-of-the-19th-century English to recreate Darío's symbolist, Parnassian manner. In other words, the two devices are offered in the same book.

VA: In "*Desfontaines travesti*," Benoit Léger examines the first French importation through translation—and rewriting—of the Henry Fielding novel, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews*, published in 1743. The translation was done by Pierre-François Guyot Desfontaines at a time in France when this genre was not considered high literature. What the French translator did was adopt the persona of "*Une Dame angloise*," which allowed him, through his paratext, to kill two birds with one stone: criticize Fielding's novel as well as the mores of his French contemporaries.

IS: The translator as author—ah, what a delicious conundrum! It makes me think of Borges's labyrinthine relationship with Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, an American translator of Italian descent. Di Giovanni met and befriended the Argentine in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In order to bring out Borges's work in English (he signed a multi-book contract with the publisher E.P. Dutton for Borges's stories, poems, and essays), the agreement was that Di Giovanni would move to Buenos Aires. But his impartiality as translator was soon replaced by a "hands-on" activist approach. He asked the Argentine to accept an added and/or twisted sentence in the translation, then asked Borges to change the original Spanish text in a subsequent reprint in order to reflect the change made. An ugly picture! Indeed, Di Giovanni was known to have the upper hand in their friendship. This lasted until, or so lore has it, Borges was having dinner with friends when

the phone rang; it was Di Giovanni. Aware of the tyranny, Borges's friends had for some time encouraged him to terminate the liaison. He finally found the guts to do it that day. He picked up the receiver, briefly told the translator this was to be their last conversation, then put the phone down. He never spoke to Di Giovanni again.

"*Une Dame angloise*" also brings to mind *Les belles infidèles*—a delightful term, don't you think? Jean Delisle offers the following quote in *Translators Through History*:

The Académie was established in 1635 by King Louis XIII at the instigation of Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642), but this institutionalization itself was an attempt to exert some control over the group of literati that had begun to meet in the house of Valentin Conrart. During the Académie's first years, Conrart was the originator of many works of translation produced by individuals and groups. He gave instructions and advice. From Conrart's circle arose the man whose new way of translating was to become characteristic of his time—Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt (1606-64), who was elected to the Académie in 1637. The term "*belle infidèle*" was coined to describe his translation of Lucian's *True History*. In his prefaces, Perrot d'Ablancourt set out the principles underlying his new method. He advocated censorship, additions, modifications or modernization of the original text in the name of taste and linguistic and cultural differences. In addition, he expressed a desire to do more than merely translate: his objective was to create and polish a language that had by this time reached maturity. D'Ablancourt's translations did, in fact, hold a definite charm for their French readers.

VA: Yes, translations guided by the principles of a social class that ordered its life according to the concepts of *honnêteté* and *bienséance*. In this type of translation the approach is determined by a social ethos of what is right and proper.

IS: Exactly, the translator's pen guided by decency and decorum. I'm convinced, however, that inside every translator there is a Perrot d'Ablancourt eager to be recognized.

VA: What do you mean?

IS: Translators have the impossible task of navigating between fidelity and beauty. Who is it that said that translators are like women—when they are faithful they aren't beautiful and when they are beautiful they aren't faithful?

VA: I want to talk about authors who faced adversity in tyrannical regimes. In *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*, J.M. Coetzee includes an essay called "Osip Mandelstam and the Stalin Ode." In it he states: "To Stalin and those members of the apparatus concerned with surveillance of the literary intelligentsia, what mattered was that every writer should make public obeisance to the great man and thus have both his pride and his spirit broken; in what spirit the praise-songs were sung was immaterial, as was the question of whether they constituted good or bad literature, as long as they did not carry discernible traces of insincerity—that is to say, traces of disobedience or even mockery." Coetzee, I think, is after an exquisite form of censorship.

IS: Mandelstam died from mistreatment in a labor camp in Siberia in 1938, although he tried to commit suicide prior to his incarceration. That was the choice faced by numerous other writers and intellectuals. Mandelstam was forced not only to make public obeisance to the Man of Steel, but also to compose "proletariat" poetry. Yet, he remained true for as long as he could endure. On dissent, he wrote: "Perhaps my whisper was already born before my lips." And, of Stalin, he said: "He thinks in bone and feels with his brow/And tries to recall his human form." Anna Akhmatova was a friend of Mandelstam. She was also close to Boris Pasternak, a poet and the author of *Doctor Zhivago*, another victim of state repression. Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1958, but the Soviet government didn't allow him to travel to Stockholm. Akhmatova composed several poems on Pasternak. In one of them, "Death of a Poet," she makes his passing in 1960 a cosmic rite of passage. This is a translation by D. M. Thomas:

The unrepeatable voice won't speak again,
Died yesterday and quit us, the talker with
groves.

He has turned into a life-giving ear of grain
Or into the gentlest rain of which he sang.
And all the flowers that grow only on this
world
Came into bloom to meet his death.
And straightaway it's grown quiet on the
planet
That bears a name so modest... Earth.

Akhmatova has another astonishing poem about resistance and exile. Again, D.M. Thomas's translation:

I'm not of those who left their country
For wolves to tear it limb from limb.
Their flattery does not touch me.
I will not give my songs to them.
Yet I can take the exile's part,
I pity all among the dead.
Wanderer, your path is dark,
Wormwood is the stranger's bread.
But here in the flames, the stench,
The murk, where what remains
Of youth is dying, we don't flinch
As the blows strike us, again and again.
And we know there'll be a reckoning,
An account for every hour... There's
Nobody simpler than us, or with
More pride, or fewer tears.

When speaking of Akhmatova, one cannot but mention one of her most brilliant pupils, Joseph Brodsky, who chose—or was chosen—by exile.

VA: You met Brodsky in 1991.

IS: Yes, although, regrettably, I never got around to talk to him about censorship or exile. But there is another censored contemporary of his in the annals of Soviet literature who had his voice heard through silence: Isaac Babel.

VA: You wrote the introduction to the Spanish edition of *Odessa Stories* and *Red Cavalry*, for the Mexican publisher Editorial Porrúa. The essay appears in English in *The Inveterate Dreamer* (2001).

IS: I'm quite fond of that essay: "Isaac Babel: Tales of Ambivalence." Babel, as you know, was a Jew who wrote in the manner of Guy de Maupassant. His stories of Cossacks allow us to understand the inferiority complex by the hyper-intellectualized Odessa Jews toward those who excelled at physical labor. Babel was at first a favorite child of the Soviet regime and a Maxim Gorki protégé. But as time went by—and as his Jewish identity became more overt—he fell out of favor. He was pushed to a form of silence which, in a writer like him, constitutes a substitute for suicide. In 1934, he gave an apology *pro vita sua* at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in Moscow. This, in my eyes, is one of the most memorable speeches ever delivered, especially given the ostracism the author was experiencing at the time. This was the era of "social realism," the proletarian approach to the novel endorsing class consciousness as the ultimate message for a writer to inject. He championed "the mediocre writer" in his speech (an allusion to Stalin's own literary efforts, no doubt). Babel stated:

Some readers naively make a demand: "All right, describe me."
And the writer thinks: "All right, I'll give him that description and make it true and honest." But that won't do. Into a description of Ivan Ivanovich there must be injected a philosophical view, some lofty ideas. For without ideas, there can be no literature.

Having composed some of the best stories in the Russian language during the Soviet transformation, Babel became a writer of silence, one without a language of his own. Isn't this ironic, given his last name? As a Jew and a committed endorser of freedom, he was sacrificed at the stake of history, turned mute by the apparatchiks around him, a victim of 20th-century obscurantism. Communism was meant to be a utopian landscape where everyone would be equal. Except that polysemy characterizes the language of ideology—

and meanings become deliberately muddled. Communism undoubtedly tampered with the semantics of the term "equality."

VA: It most certainly did. In George Steiner's terms borrowing from the Bard: The language of ideology is full of sound and fury signifying nothing. As for the totalitarian meaning of "equality," Orwell said it best: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." Let's now talk about another martyr of censorship in a despotic regime, Federico García Lorca, assassinated by an anonymous bullet in 1936, the first year of the Spanish Civil War.

IS: In *Residence on Earth*, Pablo Neruda included an ode to García Lorca. The first and last three stanzas read—in Donald D. Walsh's translation:

If I could weep with fear in a solitary house,
if I could take out my eyes and eat them,
I would do it for your black-draped orange-
tree voice
and for your poetry that comes forth
shouting.
Federico,
you see the world, the streets,
the vinegar,
the farewells in the stations
when the smoke lifts its decisive wheels
toward where there is nothing but some
separations, stones, railroad tracks.
There are so many people asking questions
everywhere.
There is the bloody blind man, and the
angry one, and the
disheartened one,
and the wretch, the thorn tree,
the bandit with envy on his back.
That's the way life is, Federico, here you
have
the things that my friendship can offer you,
the friendship of a melancholy manly man.
By yourself you already know many things,
and others you will slowly get to know.

I've never been a fan of García Lorca. He strikes me as a mannerist poet who abused folklore for his own selfish purposes. His plays are unsatisfying to me: they feel contrived. Borges, not arbitrarily, once called him "a professional Andalusian."

VA: Let's go back for a bit to George Steiner. He is among the scholars whose work on translation has received the most attention. You have an essay on Steiner's memoir, *Errata*, in *The Inveterate Dreamer*. But I've never heard you say anything about *After Babel*.

IS: Steiner, I get the feeling, has a patrician attitude. He looks down at his readers as unworthy of his intellectual caliber. I used to read him with some regularity in *Salmagundi* and *The New Yorker*, but over time I've found far better ways to entertain my mind. Proof of my disdain is what happened to me some months ago, when I stumbled upon one of Steiner's essays, "On Difficulty," originally published in 1978. It opened with this sentence: "What do we mean when we say: 'this poem, or this passage in this poem is difficult'?" His response, unfortunately, was lacking.

There is an obvious, crucial level at which this is a question about language itself. What is signified by the pragmatic experience that a lexically constituted and grammatically organized semantic system can generate impenetrability and undecidabilities of sense? No coherent answer can be given outside a complete model, such as we do not have, of the relations between 'thought' and speech, and outside a total epistemology, which again we do not have, of the congruence or non-congruence of speech-forms with a 'precedent' body of intention, perception, and vocative impulse. In such a model 'difficulty' would, presumably, be an interference-effect between underlying clarity and obstructed formulation. This,

roughly, is the classical and Cartesian reading of opaqueness, a reading whose inference is necessarily negative. But all the relevant terms—"inside"/"outside", 'intentionality'/'verbalization', and the crucial 'between' with its innocent postulate of a kind of mental space—are notoriously elusive. They activate a metaphor of separation and transfer about which neither logic nor psychology are in any agreement.

"Undecidabilities"—ay, caramba! The paragraph proves to me the expectations Steiner sets for himself and his accomplishment. An essay reflecting on length as an excess in literature needs, by definition, to be short. Likewise, one on difficulty calls for simplicity of thought. But Steiner is a show-off. His objective isn't only to parade his semantic talent. He also wants us to feel that, unlike most of us, he *gets* a poem, even when it is difficult. For me the experience of literature is the experience of dialogue and not a competition by superior talents. Steiner suffers from the same malaise of academic "discourse." By building stylistic barriers impossible to sort by the lay reader, they put forth another form of self-censorship. Some would describe that form as Darwinian: you choose your own audience. But by doing so in such narrow a way, aren't you also curtailing your own message? That said, it would be preposterous to ignore Steiner's groundbreaking studies on language, included in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* I read it in my youth in the Spanish translation published in Mexico by Fondo de Cultura Económica. It became a springboard from which I jumped to other seminal works, such as those by Ferdinand de Saussure.

VA: In *Ilan Stavans: Eight Conversations* (2004), with Neal Sokol, you've expressed enormous admiration for the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin. How does Berlin view censorship?

IS: Berlin is the opposite of Steiner and closer in spirit to Edmund Wilson, although one with a dramatically different approach to the marketplace of ideas. More than anything, he is a lucid interpreter of the Enlightenment. As we have talked about in earlier conversations, Berlin made a distinction between negative and positive freedom, and explained the difference between freedom and liberty in rousing ways. His views on censorship are easily summarized and follow along the lines of our conversations. Freedom doesn't mean the capacity to do and say anything one wishes. Civil society is built on respect and tolerance. These two concepts are based on self-imposed individual limitations. I don't desecrate the Qur'an, for instance, out of respect for the Islamic faith, but also because the same tolerance applies to me: I wouldn't want any book I hold sacred to be desecrated. Of course, this approach is summed up in the famous anecdote about Hillel, the rabbinical exegete. Once a stranger came to him and asked: "Rabbi, can you summarize the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot?" He smiled, stood on one leg, and answered: "Don't do onto others what you don't want done to you. The rest is commentary..." The famous *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie for publishing his novel *The Satanic Verses* is a useful example. Thousands in the Islamic world considered the book blasphemous (even though few ever actually read it). Its crime: Rushdie's "ridiculing" the life of Muhammad. Was Rushdie in his right to write such a fictional account? Of course, everyone is free to do as he wishes. Was he insensitive? No doubt. Did he deserve the punishment (years in hiding and under British police protection)? The answer is complicated. He had breached a tacit civil contract: he had offended the faithful. Furthermore, he had forgotten that East and West don't live under the same value system, that the concepts of freedom and tolerance in one are not the same in the other. Simply put, the Islamic world didn't go through an Enlightenment period. Berlin at Oxford said thus in the sixties. He taught us that freedom is impossible in a society without economic security, a balanced health, and an embrace of open-minded knowledge. For freedom to exist, people need justice and equality. A limited degree of self-censorship is needed to establish tolerance and respect. He also taught us, though, that in theocracies people may have economic, physical and material stability, but aren't free. I remember him making a reference once to the section on the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* to show that paternalism might set the proper conditions for people to be free, yet also withhold the possibility of being free.

VA: What are your thoughts on censorship as it relates to Octavio Paz?

IS: I expounded a bit about it in my book *Octavio Paz: A Meditation*. Paz was a figure with a double edge. He promoted intellectual and artistic freedom in Mexico from the end of World War II onward. His support for political freedom was a messier affair. He denounced the student massacre in Tlatelolco in 1968 by resigning from a diplomatic post

he held. But as time went by, he became a puppet of the ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). In his monthly *Vuelta* he assembled free-thinkers from around the world, and he often wrote essays and poetry on freedom. Yet he became a Reaganite of sorts. At the end of his life, his conservative views made him a dinosaur, a man of letters disconnected from his own native soil.

VA: Is the vise of censorship positive for literature?

IS: It certainly can be. In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill argued that society isn't the one in needs to be protected from the wayward individual, but the individual whose rights need to be protected not only from what he terms the "tyranny of the magistrate," but from the "tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling." And Nadine Gordimer states that a writer's freedom "is his right to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds his society. If he is to work as well as he can, he must take, and be granted, freedom from the public conformity of political interpretation, morals and tastes." When censorship, I add, is an obstacle, risking one's life is a worthy deed. Still, there are ways around censorship. Often those ways end up producing extraordinary literature. It is unpleasant to confess it but tyranny is good for literature. It gives writers a *raison d'être*. The best asset I might identify on the impact of censorship on literature has to do with subtlety. Censorship is the engine that gives place to metaphor. In fact, I would go as far as to suggest that censoring regimes encourage baroque literature, for the baroque is the style indulging in tricks, ploys, side-turns, and subterfuges.

VA: Then we could argue that even when censorship mobilizes a writer or translator to use devices for bypassing censorship, that in time these hypersubtle forms, as Coetzee has labeled them—born out of the game between the writer and his censor—themselves become conventions. So the secret language becomes even more subtle, and the meaning more obscure, and on and on until literature loses all traces of life.

IS: If that were to happen, the censors would be declared the winners. Authors aren't that stupid. Even in times of trouble, they don't write in order to conceal but to reveal. Metaphors, like adjectives, need to be used with caution. An abundance of them is a sign of bad writing.

VA: In the same line of thought, couldn't we argue that censorship is most useful to writers in the sense that they can capitalize on the restrictions and present themselves as an embattled tribe overpowered by a Goliath?

IS: Yes, but is it good for writers to portray themselves as victims? Look at ethnic literature in the United States. It often takes the guise of activism, but it is often superficial, contrite, and predictable. Literature and politics have always had a troubled marriage. They easily contaminate each other. What's the proper balance? One of respect, but also distance.

VA: In one of the conversations you had with Neal Sokol, you state: "one must demand the impossible from translators." And in *Dictionary Days* you devote an entire essay to the word "impossible," arguing that it means "that which cannot be done." You suggest that lexicographers have left out the impossible from the lexicons they've done over the centuries.

IS: The impossible is beyond censorship.

VA: Of the many voices who have eloquently spoken on censorship, perhaps none is as sharp as Voltaire's. As a fellow lover of dictionaries, Ilan, let me offer you this quote from his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* of 1764 as closure to this conversation: "We have a natural right to make use of our pens as of our tongue, at our peril, risk, and hazard."

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