Facing Translation: A reading on the untranslatability of Jean Cocteau's "Les Enfants Terribles"

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作者
埃文斯·克莱尔

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抽象
Jean Cocteau's murky and sensuous book, Les Enfants Terribles, if read with a linguistic and Derridean sensibility favoring flux and undecideability, is a novel written both using and against language. It is, hence, an appropriate text in the study of the problematics and eventual impossibility of literary translation. In my work, I have attempted to bridge two realms of literary analysis: the purely textual, often technical, task of translation from French to English, and a query into the content, context, and motive of the novel as story, as art. After translating the second and more relevant half of Les Enfants Terribles, I have discovered that this is a text which greatly emphasizes communication, language and speech in its narrative, which broaches the question of the effectiveness of language, which is stylistically concerned with countersense, nuanced and figurative language, and whose grammar and syntax, essential to the tone of the novel, inherently raises fatal problems of translation. At many points, particularly in its conclusion, the sense of its narrative permits an analysis that merges the theoretical and textual, as it moves progressively towards the complete dissolution of language. My work's conclusion, as well as my finished translation, is grounded by both the linguistic and semiotic theory of thinkers such as Roman Jakobson and Ferdinand de Saussure as well as the deconstruction of Derrida's notions of translatability; thus, I've explored the crucial impossibility of translating a work such as this one, and, by extension, any text.

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Read more Read less. click to open popover. Product details. You might therefore think him the ideal candidate to write an introductory monograph on ‘Les Enfants Terribles’, the most famous literary work by sometime filmmaker Jean Cocteau, a book famously adapted by Jean-Pierre Melville, the master of French film noir. Buss, hilariously mocking the received (i.e. Anglo-Saxon) view of the novel as a study of four eccentric, self-destructive children wilting in a hothouse world of their own making, insists the novel must not be read according to traditional, 19th century realist expectations. He does this so often, his assumed reader must be qu Jean Cocteau had a wide-ranging career as a poet, dramatist, screenwriter, and novelist. “Cocteau’s willingness and ability to turn his hand to the most disparate creative ventures,” James P. Mc Nab wrote in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, “do not fit the stereotypical image of the priestlike—or Proust-like—writer single-mindedly sacrificing his life on the altar of an all-consuming art. Enamored with the young poet’s work, the actors presented a reading at a theatre on the Champs-Elysees. Following this introduction, Cocteau became an active participant in the Paris arts scene. Knapp claimed that Les Enfants terribles was “Cocteau’s great work: a novel possessing the force, the tension, poetry, and religious flavor of an authentic Greek tragedy.” Then I read Les Enfants terribles and it all came flooding back. If you've read the book this may sound alarming, but fortunately in our case it apparently never went further than a lot of weirdly regimented transport-based role-plays. For Paul and Élisabeth, the central characters of Cocteau's dark and dreamy novel, the shared world of childhood fantasy takes on a more all-consuming and sinister aspect. Orphaned twins, they construct a haven of their own in their dead mother’s apartment on the rue Montmartre (just round the corner from where I work), where their room is all low