

Cvetanka Elenkova

The Ark of the Translator.
From the Experience of Translating the Anthology
At the End of the World: Contemporary Poetry from Bulgaria
(Shearsman Books, Bristol 2012)

There are three main features that are necessary to spread a literature in a widely spoken language market:

1. to have wide distribution;
2. to have a good publisher;
3. to have a good translator.

What does that mean more specifically? Whatever the weight of every language in the world, the most important thing is to have your literature distributed in the language that will provide access to as many people as possible, even those who do not speak the language it is translated into, but who understand it. The only world language fulfilling this requirement is the English language. The English language is like today's Latin. Therefore, if we talk about having your literature disseminated in the world, the most important thing is to have it in English. And not just in English with some small publisher nobody has ever heard about, without reaching the audience, but with a publisher that has a certain status.

This can be achieved not only by having a translator from this language, but an experienced translator who not only works with the field, but literally lives in it. Today's translator has to have the role pretty much of an agent. To know people, to be known by people.

To have somebody speaking English and translating into English is simply not enough – forget about the roles of universities providing students with their knowledge of language and culture, forget about spontaneous translation out of love towards the author, forget about thousands of mindless initiatives consuming money in the field of literature without the expected result as, for example, translating without even having someone to give your translation to. First know the publisher, then suggest the translation.

The role of the translator in the contemporary field of little languages such as Bulgarian, spoken by no more than seven million people, is pretty much the role of Noah, through whom humankind and all the animal world were saved.

In today's world, where interest in literature – and especially poetry – has been reduced almost to its existential minimum, all that a literature needs is one person with stable support, with an Ark that will not sink for a period of time and will transport the translator and literature in its belly. Literature needs a certain financial security.

This has to be provided mainly by state institutions and foundations (the role of private foundations is another question).

I do not insist so much on different programs for translation as on a deep understanding of the dependence of your culture on its export abroad and involving finance in its literary ambassadors – the translators.

Invest money in one or two people, and they will do more for your culture than all the programs of different institutions.

Spreading literature is not any more a question simply of translating, it is a question of the ability to suggest strong names with valuable projects fulfilling the above three points.

Money has to be spent with a target, not to be squandered on different, small projects with no response at all.

Now how to choose the right names, the right authors? Simply by going out from what is local towards what is universal, by having the right taste and care.

Allow me one more Biblical metaphor: before the Tower of Babel was destroyed and the diversity of languages was created, there was only one language, one source.

Translating little languages, a phrase which we just understood is absurd, one always has to aim at the source.

Any locality is a sign of pride. And encapsulation.

Being a translator and making the right choice means to aim at the other, not the closed atmosphere of your own culture.

To suggest that voice which is a combination of the elements of your own tradition and the language coming from far before you became a tradition, far beyond your borders.

A translator of Bulgarian literature once said the only true way to starve to death today is by translating Bulgarian literature.

Something I cannot agree with if things are settled in their right borders.

It depends on the personality of the translator and on the politics of the state.

Abstract

Cvetanka Elenkova

The Ark of the Translator

Being a poet, a translator and a publisher, the author claims that the current global literary scene has nothing to complain about. It is talent (and especially a talent for marketing) that ensures writers and their works a 'place in the sun', or, to use the key image of the essay, a place in the new Noah's Ark, namely the corpus of literary works translated into English.

Keywords

Small Literatures; Global Literature; Aesthetic Value.