

Maltese poetry in Ljubljana, World Book Capital 2010

Antoine Cassar --- 5th July 2010

Picturesque Ljubljana, with its interesting yet difficultly identifiable amalgam of the Slavic and the Mediterranean, was designated as this year's UNESCO World Book Capital, bringing with it the natural transformation from a city of bridges to a city of books. Throughout the year, the streets of Ljubljana are populated by a myriad of markets, installations, festivals and events promoting and celebrating the joy of reading. Decorating posters, t-shirts and shop windows is a short poem by Slovene poet Oton Župančič, which translates more or less as follows:



"From hand to hand, / from generation to generation - / could there be a better journey / for the book?" Thankfully, reading is one of the few fundamental human activities never to go out of fashion; likewise, and equally thankfully, the fact that western consumerist society relegates poetry to the sidelines means that poetry will never run the risk of becoming so fashionable as to find itself subsequently rejected. Bringing poetry closer to the people is indeed very easy: one of the most attractive installations in the central streets of Ljubljana is a 'poetry ice-cream stand', freely distributing cones containing paper scoops of Slovene and international verse in a variety of colours and flavours (including green for nature poems, grey for the philosophical, and of course, red for love). Beyond the apathetic teenage classroom, poetry can be anything you want it to be, including sweet and refreshing.

For the occasion, *Literature Across Frontiers* and the *Centre for Slovene Literature* have organised a poetry translation workshop in Dane, a scenic village tucked into the Karst hills, not much larger than a quarter the size of Qrendi. The chosen theme, 'Small and Large Languages', has brought together four authors from Europe and three from Asia. The 'large' languages are represented by Xi Chuan (Mandarin), Stanislav Lvovsky (Russian), Yasuhiro Yasumoto (Japanese) and Mamta Sagar (Kannada, a south Indian tongue spoken by a good 38 million, in and around the state of Karnataka), whilst the 'small' languages are represented by Veronika Dintinjana (Slovene), Yolanda Castaño (Galician), and myself, the youngest of the group, happily leaving my multilingual compositions to one side to concentrate on my more recent poems in the tiniest language of the seven, Maltese.

Under the guidance of Slovene poet and cultural organiser Brane Mozetič, we spend six days living and working together, translating samples of each other's poetry in preparation for a common reading at Ljubljana's Living Literature Festival. In reality, each author has prepared the draft translations in the weeks preceding our sojourn in Slovenia, and the workshop is a chance to carefully elucidate any unclear references or doubts of comprehension in the poems, and to explain any effects or allusions that may have been lost in the vehicular English versions from which we mainly worked. This leaves us plenty of time for discussion on the nature of literary translation, and in particular, on the varying problems faced by poets writing in 'large' or 'small' tongues. For instance, whereas Chinese or Russian authors potentially have access to a vast audience of several millions, the sheer size of their countries and literatures often causes them to feel 'lost in the ocean'; in contrast, poets writing in Galician, Slovenian or Maltese can more easily gauge their position within their local literary system, and tend to be part of much tighter cultural networks, for better and for worse. Beyond the differences as regards institutional funding and support for literature, which is more a question of politics than of national culture or idiosyncrasy (in this respect, the past year in Malta has seen notable improvements, even if against the highly ironic background of serious regressions in the policies of censorship), the most strikingly obvious disadvantage of writing in a tongue spoken by a limited population is the urgent need for translation in order for the poetry to travel. Certainly, in the specific case of Maltese, translation is a lifeline, an inevitable window to the world.



Authors at the LAF Poetry Translation Workshop, Dane, Slovenia.
Clockwise from left: Brane Mozetič, Stanislav Lvovsky, Veronika Dintinjana, Antoine Cassar, Xi Chuan, Yasuhiro Yasumoto, Mamta Sagar. Photograph © Yolanda Castaño

The joys of translating and being translated bring with them a number of interesting observations and conundrums, most especially due to the structures and habits of the languages involved. Strangely enough, plays on geographical references in some of the European poems caused great difficulty for those translating into Asian languages. One example is the translation of Yolanda Castaño's highly emotional poem *Apples from Tolstoy's garden*, where each line details a journey and experience in a different part of the world, before expressing the wish to return home (not simply a native city, but home in the form of a loved one). In the original Galician, each placename appears at the end of the line, thus forming an essential musical thread of the poem; however, the thought processes of Mandarin, Japanese and Kannada are quite different, and cannot escape placing the toponym at the beginning of each line. Indeed, in poetic translation, syntax can often become an arch-enemy of rhythm. My geographical poem *Bejn* (Between) faced similar problems, especially for Mandarin: as Chinese languages have little correspondence between written pictograms and their corresponding sounds, placenames cannot simply be transcribed phonetically, but need to be 'trans-symbolised' according to their original or modern meaning. Despite these problems and the aesthetic effects they may cause translations to lose, all seven authors were generally more than happy with their versions of their colleagues' works – after all, under the surface of language, a poem is essentially composed of a developed idea and emotion. In this sense, poetry can be considered a language in itself, of infinite dialects. As George Steiner declares in his seminal essay *After Babel*, it is the very impossibility of translation that makes it such an exciting and hopeful task, as each translation potentially draws a tangent closer to the original.

ನದಿಯೊಳಗೆ ಆಕಾಶ - ಮೋಡ - ತಣ್ಣಗಿನ ಸೂರ್ಯ,
ನನ್ನ ಬೊಗಸೆಯಲ್ಲೊಂದು ನದಿ.

Fix-xmara s-sema, is-shaba, ix-xemx.
Fl-iskutella t'idejja, ix-xmara.

ಮೇಲೆರಚಿದರೆ ಹನಿಹನಿಯಾಗಿ
ಬೆಲ್ಲವುದು ಮೈ ಮೇಲೆ
ನದಿ - ಆಕಾಶ - ಮೋಡ - ಸೂರ್ಯ.

Jekk nerfa' idejja 'l fuq,
ix-xmara tixxerred fi qtar, itferrex
is-sema, is-shaba, ix-xemx għal fuqi.

ಬೊಗಸೆ ನೀರು ಕುಡಿದರೆ, ಕುಡಿದಂತೆ
ನದಿ - ಆಕಾಶ - ಮೋಡ - ಸೂರ್ಯರನ್ನ

Jekk mill-iskutella t'idejja nixrob ix-xmara,
għo fija s-sema, is-shaba, ix-xemx.

ಅಡಕ ಯಾರು ಯಾರೊಳಗೆ?

Ghidli ftit, min fih min?

Perhaps due to my profound interest and fixation for poetic rhythm, the poet I work most closely with during the workshop is Mamta Sagar, who works in Bangalore as a writer, professor, and socio-cultural activist. The incantatory quality of her Kannada poems, at once essential and elemental, was the most difficult facet to translate of all the texts submitted for the workshop. Listening to her reciting her poetry is to witness and be progressively overcome by an extended crescendo of positive energy; I cannot forget the warm chill running up my spine as she recites her poems *Rain* and *Rain again*. Of all the poems I translated, the one that works best in Maltese is the overtly lyrical *River* poem, due perhaps to the economy of words shared by both Dravidian and Semitic grammar. Being a poet of rhythm, her Kannada version of my poem *Comb* (Lead) sounds as ominously vexed and frightening as it does in the Maltese original; I happily learn that despite the pitfalls set by differences of syntax, in the hands of an expert poet, it is indeed possible to translate rhythm.



Left to right: Bei Dao, Yolanda Castaño, Xi Chuan.
Photograph © Yolanda Castaño

Towards the end of the workshop, we give a reading at the village library of Sežana, as a dress rehearsal for the coming performance at the Ljubljana festival. The reading is attended by an audience with an average age of around 55 to 60 – a heart-warming experience, particularly as we witnessed their childlike enthusiasm and fascination for both the poetry and the ‘exotic’ sounds and rhythms of the languages. Back in Ljubljana, the night before our performance, we had the unique pleasure of attending a reading by world-acclaimed poet Bei Dao, one of the most important representatives of the Chinese ‘Misty Poets’ who reacted creatively against the restrictions of the Cultural Revolution. Precisely on the 21st anniversary of the Tiananmen Square incident, Bei Dao recites his celebrated poem *Anthem*, which inadvertently became the hymn of the pro-democracy movement, and appeared on posters and banners carried through the

tragic protests in the same square. On that 4th June of 1989, Bei Dao happened to be in Berlin for a literature conference; he has been prohibited from re-entering China ever since.

As Bei Dao's reading also coincided with the background news of the attack on the international flotilla to Gaza, he recited his poem *Ramallah*, written several years ago whilst he was visiting Palestine as part of a UN peace delegation. I follow up in our reading the next evening by reciting *Comb*, and the following airport haiku, which Yasuhiro Yasumoto very happily succeeded in translating into classical Japanese form, conserving the 5-7-5 morae structure: "*L-ajruport. Tifel / čkejken jaqbež ič-checkpoint. / Ma jafx b'fruntieri.*" ("The airport. Boy leaps / over the customs checkpoint. He knows no borders.") Yasumoto himself regales the audience with a performance of his family poems in a number of traditional Japanese chants. Among the other highlights of the recital were Lvovsky's Bukowskian short poems on urban relationships, Dintinjana's lyrically descriptive poems on time and death, Xi Chuan's hilariously cynical *Notes on the mosquito*, and a common multilingual rendering of Castaño's *Apples from Tolstoy's garden*.



Veronika Dintinjana reads her Slovene translation of a poem by Antoine Cassar at the Ljubljana Living Literature Festival, 5th June 2010.

Left to right: Yolanda Castaño, Stanislav Lvovsky, Veronika Dintinjana, Xi Chuan, Yasuhiro Yasumoto, Mamta Sagar, Antoine Cassar. Photograph © Yolanda Castaño

The open-air setting of our reading further strengthened my conviction of poetry as an expression of freedom: poetry is voice and all that it carries, and a festival is the perfect opportunity for the verse to be taken off the page, off the shelf, and out into the world. Poetry, and artistic expression in general, offers us the

freedom to explode into all the themes, styles and rhythms we desire (Maltese, Chinese and Russian national censorship policies permitting). Above all, literary festivals bring people together, in the universal languages of poetry, hospitality, and friendship.

The author expresses heartfelt thanks to Literature Across Frontiers, the Centre for Slovene Literature, the Malta Arts Fund, Brane Mozetič, and all fellow authors participating in the LAF translation workshop, for sharing so easily their enthusiasm and love for poetry.

Twegiba

ta' Bei Dao

Il-viljakk igorr il-bassezza tiegħu qisha karta tal-identità.
Il-bniedem qalbu f'idu jilbes ġieħu bħal epitaffju.
Ara – is-sema dehbi qed imewweg
b'riflessjonijiet imgharrqa tal-mejtin.

Jgħidu li żmien is-silg ilu snin twal li ntemm.
Għala tant ilsna tas-silg imdendla ma' kullimkien?
Ras it-Tama t-Tajba digà nstabet.
Għala tant qlugħ jigru fuq il-Baħar Mejjiet?

Ġejt f'did-dinja b'xejn
għajr karta, hbula, u dell.
Issa niġi biex jigġudikawni,
u kulma għandi ngħid huwa dan:

Isma' 'l hawn. Jiena ma nemminx!
Tajjeb wisq. Irfist u rbaħt
elf għadu taħt saqajk. Sejjahli
l-elf u wieħed.

Ma nemminx li s-sema huwa ikħal.
Ma nemminx x'jgħid ir-ragħad.
Ma nemminx li l-holm mhux ta' veru,
li lil hinn mill-mewt ma hemmx tpattija.

Jekk il-baħar iwaqqa' d-diga,
ħalli l-ilma mielaħ jimlieli qalbi.
Jekk l-art terġa' titla' mill-baħar,
nergħu naghzlu li ngħixu fuq l-għoljiet.

Id-dinja ddur. Kostellazzjoni tfexfex
tniffed il-wesgħa tas-sema bla swar.
Qed taraha dik t'hemm? Ideogramma qadima –
għajn il-gejjieni, thares lura.

traduzzjoni ta' Antoine Cassar