

Translation – Towards the Shore of Yet Another Tomorrow

Which comes first – writing or translation, the chicken of the original text or the egg of translation? I wondered while I was writing this piece. The answer seems obvious, you can't translate something that doesn't exist, that's not yet written – although I have often wished this were possible. My translators and I have joked about this, with me telling them: “you go ahead and translate, I'll write it afterwards.” (Perhaps we should have tried this with this speech, which is dedicated to translation.)

But now I am starting to think that things are not so obvious. Actually, every writer is in and of themselves also a translator. They translate, carry over, dress up in words that which they take from inside themselves or from the world, from what has been experienced, thought, read. Writing is transformation and translation of the visible and the invisible, from which the author creates their works. Or translation of the invisible into the visible.

It is no coincidence that the etymology of the word “translation” (from the Latin *translatus*) means to carry from one place to another, to transfer. In this sense, writers, translators and smugglers are all actually doing one and the same thing – translating, that is, carrying across, transferring that which is desired, valuable, missing, suppressed, forbidden.

Allow me to tell a story about the first thing I ever wrote, even though a more precise wording would be the first thing I ever “wrote down” on a blank sheet of paper. When I was six or seven, I had a nightmare, which – as if that wasn't bad enough – recurred every single night. The more scared I got about having the dream again, the more frequently it occurred. One morning I got up my courage to tell it to my grandmother, whom I was living with at the time. But as soon as I started, she stopped me, pressing a finger to her lips. Scary dreams should not be retold, because it makes them come true. Actually, she put it much more beautifully: they fill with blood and come to life.

So I was left alone with my nightmare, unable to tell it to anyone, yet also lacking the strength to hold it in. So then I came up with the, to my mind, brilliant idea – we can only be brilliant at six or seven – of writing down my dream. I secretly tore a page out of my grandpa's notebook and using the freshly learned letters of the alphabet, in a rather ugly scrawl, I wrote out my dream. And... a miracle occurred. I never had that nightmare again. But I also never forgot it. That was the price. (I still remember it today, fifty years later, I can tell it to you at the end of this talk, if you'd like to know.)

But getting back to our topic, what did I actually do? I transferred the nightmare I had had, I pulled it out of the zone of dreams and brought it out into the light. I carried it out of the darkness, translated it out of the depths of the night, onto a blank sheet of paper. And as we all know, scary things don't look as scary in broad daylight. So let me say it again – the origin of writing lies precisely in such a translation from one world (in this case that of a dream or of the invisible) into another, visible world. Please allow me to indulge in this analogy as well. Unlike Charon, who ferries souls across the river Lethe in his boat into the kingdom of the dead, writing ferries or transfers the souls of the dead in the opposite direction, into the living kingdom of readers.

In any case, we must admit that every writer is secretly a translator.

I have always believed that literature can do simple yet vitally important things. My first experience with that dream taught me that by telling stories, we tame the beasts of fear little by little. Surely this is why we tell our children bedtime stories in the evening, before they fall asleep. Myths exist for the same reason as well. Just take my favorite example of Scheherazade – you tell a story and put off death for one more night. Until, in the end, the opium of those stories transforms your potential killer Shahriar and makes him experience first curiosity and then love. (Interestingly, in Bulgarian the words for “curiosity” and “love” share the same root – *liubov* and *liubopitstvo*.)

I was recently talking to Marie Vrinat-Nikolov, my French translator and, I daresay, my friend – incidentally, one of the first-ever translations of any of my books was her French version of *Natural Novel*. The question came up about how neither of us love that strict local-global dichotomy. (As an aside, I find all dichotomies suspicious and reductive of meaning.) Some might be tempted to say – isn't that exactly what translation is doing, transforming the local into the global? But they would be wrong. Translation is not meant to transform a local story into a global one. (Just as it cannot “translate” a weak text into a strong one – even though I have come across poorly written works that sound slightly better in translation, but only slightly.) This is erroneous alchemy, if you ask me. I prefer my writing not to enter into the local-global opposition, but rather to freely transform it. Because our writings are always personal – and the personal is beyond this elementary division. I write from a

point of pain or from a point within myself that causes me to seek words to describe it: anxiety, inability to understand the world and myself, empathy, despair, a happy feeling of togetherness. In this sense, the translator translates this personal feeling through his or her body, mind and heart, preserving the personal with the same emotion. I cannot imagine a translator who does not feel this emotion while translating a piece of writing. Leave the translation of works that don't move you to artificial intelligence. And perhaps this will be the key difference, a unique test of sorts that will immediately show who has done a translation – man or machine. Until machines learn to experience emotion, emotion will be the sign of the human.

I have always become friends with my translators. Perhaps because the story standing between us is personal not only to me, but also to them. I have collected a series of stories about how the book a translator is translating suddenly synchronizes with what is going on in his or her life. I say this without a hint of mysticism, this is simply a part of the tiny miracles of literature. Perhaps we can explore this further in the discussion.

When we mention excitement, let's take it even a step further – I don't think a good translation is possible without empathy. (Here we find yet another difference with artificial intelligence.) My whole book *Physics of Sorrow* is dedicated to empathy, but here I want to examine it from another angle. Empathy is that existential minimum you cannot write a story without. Thanks to empathy, the writer can get inside his or her characters and tell their stories, create through his or her own body. Without empathy, the true act of reading is also impossible – that kind of reading that truly experiences what is written. Only the empathetic reader transforms what is read into experience, and this is the most important transformation. This is the accumulation of personal emotional experience through the emotional experience of fictional characters. This also holds true for the translator, because she is a mediator between the writer's words and the reader in a foreign language. The same degree of empathy is required of the translator, I would even say they need empathy to the second degree, so as to co-experience what the author has written, but also to carry it over into a different cultural context, so as to awaken the reader's empathy as well. This is empathy in two languages. Here I would like to thank all translators, especially mine, who have mastered this art of empathy. I know that it is simultaneously exhausting and energizing.

Why are translation and literature so important precisely today?

We cannot close our eyes to the times we live in – a time of war, populism and aggression. A time of false narratives about humanity and the world. We are witnessing a huge battle over stories about the world and humanity. And those of us on the side of stories cannot remain neutral. Literature, and especially translated literature, is a natural antidote against populism and

propaganda. Literature in translation gives us the full picture of the world, the entire range of voices and stories, not just the dominant ones, but rather all the stories, including the suppressed stories and those coming from “small” languages (in terms of numbers of speakers).

We live in a world where there is no longer a center and periphery. When there is a pandemic, a war or a crisis, the center of pain is everywhere. Today, Europe is bleeding in the east, and for this reason the stories of people from that part of the world can show us something more about this wound. The world today has many throbbing points of pain and cataclysm, thus translation of the voices from those places, the translation of stories from those places is vitally important, I daresay even life-saving. Because what hurts there already hurts everywhere. The world has long since become a single body and a single network. There is no way for you to be happy and calm at one end of the network when someone is crying for help at the other end.

The empathy I am talking about is now politically crucial as well, it is imperative for our shared survival.

Ideologies and fundamentalism are in their very nature incapable of empathy. To them, the Other is the enemy, who is removed from humankind. Because the human distracts us, diverts us, it is merely a source of weakness and hesitation. No man, no problem, as Stalin cynically quipped. No humanity, no problem – this is what populism and propaganda think today as well. And this is perhaps the most terrifying thing. For this reason, we need storytelling and empathy. We need to experience stories – stories that explain the world in all its complexity, and not with the deceptive clarity of conspiracy theories. Stories in which the Other is told as a human being, with all of their vulnerability and fragility, and not as an enemy removed from the ranks of the human. The hidden power of our personal stories is that they work directly with the human, which by its very nature precedes ideologies and the nation-state.

Those of us gathered here know – without ever having been taught – about the hidden power of literature, which produces sympathy and empathy through the telling of stories. We also know that in a world plagued by an overproduction of hate and division, what we are doing is putting off the end, day by day, month by month, year by year. How? By telling and translating the world’s stories, stories that awaken empathy, that defend the human and push back against disintegration. All of us writers and translators (which actually turn out to be one and the same thing) are trying to transfer the reader by the hand, step by step and page by page to the shores of yet another tomorrow.