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Lost and Found in Translation

The history of the written language of Albanian, as is maybe the history of many other languages, begins with a translation. It is just a partial translation from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. This very important linguistic act modeled, in a way, the shape of all the future of the Albanian language, as well as its culture, its spirit, its identity, and its opportunity for a real dialog with the world around it. This fundamental act anticipated the cultural model that Albanians chose to have in their future.

Despite being a small country, with a tragic history of wars, and the irony of fate in a wonderful geographic position, Albania has survived. Each epoch, Albanians found themselves shipwrecked, but at the end, alive—with their language, their land, their culture. In a long battle for the survival of their culture and identity, the great minds of the Albanian people found translation as a strong and secure arm.

Clear-minded, with their persistent longing to be culturally European, our great illuminists discovered translation to be a most important key to being contemporary, and being part of the same cultural climate as their old continent. They realized a highly ambitious project: translation of great classics of philosophy and literature for a population that was less than a million habitants. But they had known that this cultural exchange—literature, arts, philosophy, science, religion—could keep the Albanian spirit alive and fresh.

The darkest time for Albania was the second half of 20th century when the communists came to power. They chose isolation as the best tactic to hold their power for as long of a time as possible. Unfortunately it worked for fifty years. And it was a dark time, even for translation and translators. More than one thousand translators were imprisoned, absurdly, being accused of translating contemporary western authors. In their time, in prison, they furtively continued their old noble job, translating poets, classics, great mind of the past and present world culture. Their works never saw the light of publishing until the breakdown of communist power in 1990. But, alas, it was too late, most of them were dead or near death.

It was our generation who rediscovered these translators and learned from them and honored them. We were isolated for more than fifty years from European and world culture. To understand how isolated not just Albania, but all East Europe, was, it is worthy to mention what John Steinbeck said when he met and talked with some of most cultivated people in his visit to the Soviet Union: “Their English was so old fashioned it resembles the English of the Victorian epoch.” Watching how deep the gap between Albanian and Europe was dug over the years, what could the young generation, highly ambitious and talented, do for their life and for their future?—nothing less than what their ancestors did so well decades ago, redeeming the Albanian spirit, lost in the darkness of isolation: to translate, to write, to dialog with European and world culture.

Indeed, in just fifteen years, twenty-four thousand titles were published in Albanian, which means eight new titles each day. (Today Albania has a population around three million

people). This is an extraordinary detail of what is happening in Albanian intellectual culture right now.

In a way the cultural history of the 20th century was repeated in Albania in just fifteen years, the most important time to heal the wounds of isolation and to see towards Western values and civilization.

So my generation, after so many years, discovered the pleasure of reading and the pleasure of translating, which is the deepest reading. We discovered great authors that for many years were banned and not translated, whose writing was, maybe, equal or a little bit more important than what we were doing in those years. There are moments in the history of any literature when the translation, paradoxically, is much more important than the original writing. There are many factors that can explain this situation; the most important is a total need of the language itself, which after such isolation, is a need to communicate with the surrounding language systems. Giving and taking—this is how languages live, this is how literature lives and this is how civilizations live and are inherited and “translated” into other civilizations. As George Steiner has observed, “languages are timid organisms, they can grow, live and die ... but what harms them is being isolation ... they crack under the weight of their old syntax ...”

What is happening in Albania now is a typical post-colonial crisis, the crisis of identity: who are we? do we have a culture? can we be contemporary citizens? can we be as civilized as any European, or any other? Some academics and writers and some poets began to dig in “the glorious past” to praise our oldness, and our “extraordinary language so old and so powerful.” And they began what they called “the purification of our language from the pollution of other languages.” For us it was clear that this tended to be another kind of isolation, as harmful, in a way, as the other. It is a provincial viewpoint of contemporary Albanian society and its relationship with Western civilization, stemming from an inability to realize, and to be integrated in, what is happening in Albania now—their inability to be contemporary.

One must be contemporary. “It’s a necessity,” said Arthur Rimbaud in a letter, “for a writer and a translator to be contemporary. He must be.” So diving in the depths of reading in foreign languages and foreign minds, little by little, we realized that the way to be contemporary is not only to read and to translate contemporary writers. It is not enough. We must update the language with which we speak and write every day. One can’t be a contemporary writer if his language couldn’t response to the cultural dynamics around the world.

On one point the Albanian writers and translators agreed with the academics: the language must be clean. Yes, but must clean from ideological shadows of the past, by slogans and schematics, linguistics idioms. So the process of translating, in a way, began changing even our language. The touchstone for a good translation is when the new change becomes, little by little, a natural part of the language, of the spoken and written language. We, in the words of Walter Benjamin, “Italianize Albanian, Germanize Albanian, Anglicize Albanian, and so on.” All this is related to the talent for catching the new idiom, the proper idiom.

The writers and translators must sharpen their ear in everyday language and find, there, the new stuff which will refresh the language and the consumer of this language.

And in this complex process of translating and changing each Albanian writer is an actor, and at the same time, an audience; it is a producer, and at the same time, a consumer. And his hard job, keeping fresh and in move with the waters of speech, is worthwhile. It is in this watery mirror of speech where each of us, writers and non writers, poets and non poets, translators and non translators, find reflected their real face, their real identity, inscribed and translated. Thus, the spirit of a people becomes fresher than ever, more communicable than ever with itself and his neighbors.