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The weak point

A curious physiological phenomenon conditions the human eye. A smudge, the *punctum caecum* obscures the retina, making a total view impossible. In scientific terminology, this is the blind spot, but if we translate literally the expression used by Sigmund Freud, we should be talking about the weak point (*der schwache Punkt*). It is a good idea to bring out this difference at the start because, from Freud onwards, the concept is no longer a concern of scientists but a metaphor that helps us to think about all those things that the gaze overlooks for reasons that are inherent to our way of looking. In the golden age of Vienna, the obscure zone was equated to woman. The weak gender was taken to be a continent apart. One good example of this is the representation of a *vagina dentata* that upset Salvador Dalí in one of the corridors of his school – it was a fountain with a waterspout in the form of a lion's mouth just at the height of a girl's hips that distressed him and, only with the tools of Freudian analysis was he able to find an explanation for this childhood terror.

However, the Paranoic-Critical Method still has its uses for delving into the obscurity of poetic images. Marc Romera in "*Acalasia*" (*Achaliasia*), one of the stories in the collection *La intimitat* (*Intimacy-Empúries*, Barcelona 2008), sends his main character to Miami. The young man realises that the city is full of dead birds and run-over cats but, even so, "half an hour later he's lapping at a cunt with all the desire in the world, or he's sitting at a restaurant table eating a hamburger with cheese and onion". The simile that brings together the dead pigeon, the mincemeat and female genitals works because it bears the terrible revelation that, in a few minutes, a body full of vitality can become inert meat. Rembrandt and Francis Bacon were fascinated at the sight of a slaughtered bull because of this *memento mori*. Yet the solitary traveller created by the Catalan writer

is not very impressed by distant landscapes, is itching to get out of an America that's full of man-eating crocodiles and female neighbours who are ready for anything and, at long last, tuck into some of the "donuts we make at home". The Dalí-style paranoia here is not fear before the female Other but before something that is culturally different. The only way out of the uneasiness brought on by an unknown world is the happy homecoming.

Another literary being burdened with the dead weight of difference that excludes in two ways —being of another sex and

being of another culture— may be found in *La pell freda* (Cold Skin, translated by Cheryl Leah Morgan; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005) by Albert Sánchez Piñol. If we have the courage to read this work metaphorically we start to wonder. Who is the amphibian chained up in the lighthouse and what does that woman represent?

And again, what separates the powerful literary imagery showing

the invasion by some infrahuman beings from the rats that crept out of all the corners in Nazi propaganda films? The anthropologist has developed in his laboratory an image that had to work of necessity. The commercial success of the novel is surely due to the possibility of a double reading. For one thing, the more ingenuous readers find therein facile identification with a deep unease that, once again, was precisely defined by Sigmund Freud. Fear of castration is not at all a literal concept and the terror is not caused by the presence of any knife. Terror is born of the mere possibility of the threat that someone might come and take what is ours. Batis Caffo in his multiple reincarnations —we see only one episode but it seems clear that the lighthouse can never be without a keeper— is a hero who struggles to preserve the limits of the island, a metaphorical island that stretches pretty well to the limits of the world. In a postmodern society, which shows that it has lost all desire for rootedness, such a ferocious battler turns out to be comforting. This figure is the incarnation of the desire for the power to be what we are not. The melancholy of postmodern times that has lost its world of yesteryear is cured with a new epic of imaginary heroes. An epic of cartoon heroes, capable of absolutely amazing conquests.

Another reading offered by *La pell freda* is a pedagogical reinterpretation of the critique of colonialism that shows how bad the imperialists are. From this point of view, too, the reader is spared any self-criticism and surveys the world from a safe observation point. The conflicts are a mere theoretical problem because dramatic information from far distant places always comes filtered through a screen. Accordingly, we have the Citauca frog-monsters to identify with, and we can approve of their desperate struggle to conserve their atavistic way of life. And it becomes evident that, behind the story of these frog-monsters, there is the desire to denounce the fact that everything that defends its own land will always be seen as a monster.

The winner in this clash of identities is violence. Brutal subjugation or fierce resistance are the only two possibilities in a world that has come to a standstill in cyclic time. Everything is

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always the same and there is no chance of progress or change. It is not surprising that the biblical gesture of trying to cross the sea by walking on its waters, at which point the novel ends, should be frustrated by the main character's own wish.

Postcolonial literature has produced quite a number of works of impeccable political correctness but, lurking beneath the surface of feigned optimism, these novels reproduce the models of good-guy and bad-guy, the powerful and the weak, thereby updating the structures that yet again underpin clichés and prejudices. Stereotypes do their job almost imperceptibly in a work of literature. One only has to recall what Joan Capri used to say in his monologues. "Enter good guy, glass of milk. Enter bad guy, double whisky".

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A good example of this stance would be Najat El Hachmi's novel *L'últim patriarca* (Planeta, Barcelona, 2008)¹. This would be worthy of detailed study, both because of the enthusiastic critical reception of a *foreigner* who writes in *our* language and because of the manifest rejection the author shows for the culture she comes from. The public, in fact, applauded the transmutation of Maghrebi society into the despotic father figure who

confirms all pre-existing prejudices. The testimony of a writer who knows the society from within gives readers the placid sensation that they can stay with their traditional contempt for immigrant bricklayers since it confirms that these people are really like that. The last patriarch is the image that contains all the attributes of the hated father, so origin—the father, as metaphor for origin, for lineage—is the only thing that can be blamed for the narrator's exclusion. Yet this father who beats, rapes and coerces to the point of asphyxiation is, at the same time, the only one who is capable of breaking through the frontiers of impoverishment. The eros of violence is overwhelmingly imposed. The father, who makes straighter and straighter walls, is capable of integration while the mother in her victim's headscarf remains walled into sterile tradition and, towards the end of the novel, her character fades away almost to the point of disappearing. Reading Víctor Català's *Solitud*² and Mercè Rodoreda's *La plaça del diamant*³ has been of no use to the writer, not even for sketching the way to emancipation. The narrator, nevertheless, does get out after several failed attempts and finally attains satisfaction in a sexual relationship with her father's brother. Her uncle is a well-educated, well-read, cultured man. This replacement of the real father by the possible father makes it more than clear that, in order to become integrated, you have to deny what you are. To become integrated into the new society, you have to trample on your origins and the rejection has to be as unequivocal as the ridiculous

■ ¹ Forthcoming in English as *The Last Patriarch*, Serpent's Tail, London, April 2010 [translator].

² Published in English, in the translation of David H. Rosenthal, as *Solitude* by Readers International, 1992 [translator].

³ Published in English, in the translation of David H. Rosenthal, as *The Time of the Doves* by Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980 [translator].

nightdress that the narrator put on when she said her prayers in her stage of religious blindness. Is this the attitude we want to promote as a society? Do we want to be so intransigent in order to accept newcomers?

One's view of a literary work can hardly be neutral or complete. What we are able to see is always conditioned by acquired blind spots, by the things we prefer not to see. The gaze can gobble up whole regions thanks to the *weak point* principle, and the more metaphorical the smudge in the eye, the more effective is the distortion of the image.

From the standpoint of the canon of Catalan literature, the map drawn in over a hundred translations in the past ten years is still —despite undeniable efforts and successes— quite full of omissions of major works and writers. However, the precariousness of less-than-sporadic translations is now a thing of the past.

It will be more difficult, though, to eliminate the blind spot that fogs up the image of Catalan literature as a whole. When Catalan culture was guest of honour at the 2007 Frankfurt Book Fair, some —very few, it should be stressed— reviews that appeared in the German newspapers were nothing less than head-on, offensive and prevaricating attacks (for example, the first reports on Catalonia as guest culture published in *Der Spiegel*). Nevertheless, these are not the most damaging pieces in the long run. It is relatively easy to combat someone who fights out in the open. It is much more difficult to combat the arguments of Merten Worthmann, who lauds the prose of Josep Pla in a series of articles but, at the same time, does not fail to remind his readers that Pla only wrote diaries,



articles, brief prose pieces, and that not even the greatest of Catalan writers has written a novel in the strict sense of the word... This intentional put-down is serious because a people without a novel can never be considered a nation. It is this bourgeois genre *par excellence* that has to confirm that a people has gone beyond the stage of folktales and doggerel. In brief, for Worthmann, Pla is and “will remain a chronicler —a hunter and gatherer of observations worthy of noting down and of travel stories that (usually) never go outside his homeland”.

In Germany it was surprising to see the punctiliousness of the descriptions of the plot of a novel, giving away points that have stimulated curiosity and showing how the text was

understood and interpreted. Yet these attentive readings are not always without feistiness. Edgar Schütz is at pains to demonstrate in his review of Jaume Cabré’s novel *Les veus del Pamano* (Voices from the River, Proa, Barcelona 2004) that the action takes place in the Pyrenees just as it might happen in any other part of Spain. He wields a comparison with Jorge Semprún to assert that in Cabré’s contribution there is nothing that

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one might not find in the works of “other Spanish, Catalan, Basque and Galician writers”. The most worrying words, however, are to be found at the start of the review where he says that Spanish literature —missing no chance to stress yet again that all the literatures in Spain form a single whole— “has begun, after a long, concentrated silence, to dig up the past”. Schütz talks about exhumation while Worthmann titles his long text in *Literaturen* “The Dance around the Wounds”. Although Germans have somehow taken on and confronted their past, there are times when they still get extraordinarily worked up if people probe into chapters related with the Second World War, as if it has not been possible to add any new point of view.

Translation is a constant battle against the fading away of the object that is there in front of the eye. The universe created by letters is the challenge posed to the translator, as are the understanding and emotion arising from an original text because the task of the translator is to show the image clearly in another context. What is lost in translation, then? Sofia Coppola’s film *Lost in Translation* (2003) deals very directly with this matter. But, unless I am mistaken, we have no consolidated translation of this title in Catalan. It is the first thing lost in this specific case. Since the film has not been screened in Catalan, we also lack, among many other references, this *topos* of American industry in order to be able to repeat, with a new formula, the old truth of *traduttore traditore*.

Popular wisdom says titles cannot be translated before the whole work has been translated. With equal submissiveness we also accept cleaning products or foodstuffs that have, one notes, names that are totally untranslatable. Going from “Mr. Proper” to “Don Limpio” seems to be unaffected by any philological scruple, but if the label of this or any other product were translated into a language of little influence, it is taken for

granted that the registered trademark would be unrecognisable and sales would plummet, and if the packaging is too well done people might even think it is a pirate copy.

Translation is also a political act. The blindness can sometimes come to be so great that the blind spot completely engulfs the original. Advertisements, dubbed films and interviews in newspapers where people from all over the world speak our language without the source ever being featured alongside it, and still less the translator, make one imagine that there has never been any translation, that the world is created, narrated and described in just one language. In a world enclosed in a bubble, nothing wobbles and everything is controllable and within one's grasp. Hence the fear inspired by the amphibians that live equally well in water or on land.

What is lost in a translation is nowhere near as easy to define as the way in which Sofia Coppola goes about it in one scene of her film in which a Japanese interpreter reduces the avalanche of words of her energetic compatriot, the director of photography, to just one sentence in English. The leading man, who is about to be photographed, simply opts to adopt the most appropriate expression for the circumstances and ignore the interpreter's instructions and the photographer's gestures.

For Bill Murray, veteran of the screen, it is much more shocking to turn on the television and come face-to-face with himself in a film that once made him famous. It is him but younger and, moreover, dubbed into Japanese. Is that still him, this double trapped in the past and speaking an incomprehensible language? Translation produces doubles that seem identical but they are not that at all. This encounter with one's own image has nothing to do with the scene before the mirror in which each creature again discovers and fixes its identity. Translation is more like the reflection in the glass in which one's own face is confused with the face of a passer-by. Yet the shock of having to recognise in a stranger the features of one's own face is as necessary for constructing a personality as the still surface of the water is for the Narcissuses to grow. It is not enough only to see one's face reflected in a mirror to know what one is like, but one must also know what it is that one shares with strangers. And this too is clear; one's ears must be open to hear how others see one. Identity requires porous skin.

What is foreign and what is one's own are not divided into black and white packages. With others we share, rather, a diffuse mirror in which are reflected the analogies that make us see things we could see no other way, but that also have us imagining some that perhaps are not there.

Translation shows us that things do not remain fixed in a single and irreplaceable object but that they have the power of reproduction. The relationship between the idea and its copies is a recurrent theme in literature. There are authors who, obsessed with their quest for the absolute, have rejected the possibility of imperfect variants that multiply the world and make it incommensurable. We surely find one of the greatest literary monuments to this angst in the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, and especially in his chimera of "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" (Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote) in the collection *Ficciones* (1944)⁴, where the translator manages to equal the original by copying it out again in an absolutely identical version.

The genuine article, the only original, vanishes in the chain of reproductions. "But this same thing, this identical meaning is not given anywhere in the manner of a third text, whose

status would be that of the third man in Plato's *Parmenides*, a third party between the idea of man and the human examples that are thought to participate in the real and true idea," says Paul Ricoeur in *Sur la traduction* (Fayard, Paris, 2004)⁵. The only remedy for overcoming this distressing situation is being aware of the insurmountable abyss, of a primordial division.

Ricoeur asks us to live with the "mind the gap" of the New York subway always in mind. There is an immobile platform and there are trains in movement, but at this station there are no stops because the abyss is insurmountable. There are only possible vertiginous leaps from one train to another, but one can never achieve the peace of a platform made of eternal and fixed things.

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The problem posed by Paul Ricoeur is connected with Plato's confirmation in *The Republic* that nothing human can ever attain repose, everything is transformed and keeps changing so it is not possible to show in art an absolute that would hold for all cases and for all times. The philosopher is not able to admit this truth, which is so simple, so evident. And if transformation is the characteristic of all the palpable things that surround us, the chief characteristic

of language cannot be otherwise either. Language describes and captures the world of its time and is deeply impregnated by the individual thoughts that have used it at very specific moments. Language as a philosophical problem cannot, then, be pondered from immobility. And the practice of translation is possibly the clearest demonstration that language exists only as utterance. Only at one time and in one place do words take on their sense.

The most problematic issue in this philosophical review of translation is the place of retranlations. In Ricoeur's words, "Talking about retranslation by the reader, I am broaching the more general problem of the ceaseless retranslation of the main works, the great classics of global culture, the Bible, Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, Molière. It should perhaps even be said that it is in retranslation that we most clearly observe the urge to translate, stimulated by the dissatisfaction with regard to existing translations." Hans Christian Andersen showed very clearly, in his story about the Snow Queen, the consequences of this desire for immobility. A bit of ice, infinitely tiny, invisible, falls into the eye of a boy and, thenceforth, he is no longer able to want anything other than the icy desert where the Queen dwells. Living in her crystalline palace, he escapes from time and all mutation but, fortunately, his friend Gerda has sufficient resources to go all

■ ⁴ Published in English, in the translation of Andrew Hurley, as *Collected Fictions* by Penguin (Non Classics), 1999 [translator].

⁵ Published in English, in the translation of Eileen Brennan, as *On Translation* by Routledge, 2006. All quotes in the text are taken from this book [translator].

the way to Lapland to find him and give him back his sense of the seasons, and the boy once again starts feeling the time that flows and that transforms everything. The great classics are not translated to “improve” the already existing translation. Each new translation of Shakespeare or of Dante is a new aesthetic proposal that might entail adaptation of a metric form, or the wish to establish a new interpretation of a concept. The “dissatisfaction” is nothing other than the desire to imprint a trace of one’s own existence in the bosom of the language. Treating the translated work as an always-imperfect copy of an inaccessible original means, more than anything else, erasing the subject. Thus it seems that language might exist without the individuals that speak it. If “language speaks us” as Heidegger says, man is mere raw material, reduced to a cog in a machine. Was it not precisely this that was the driving force of Nazism?

Francis Bacon’s triptych *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* was painted in 1944. The violence of his biomorphic beings is concentrated in the gaping mouths of the three figures under the cross. The horrendous orifice of the Delphic oracle burbling its inarticulate sounds presents itself in the bestiality of a tongueless mouth full of teeth. This is why we must hope that poems are not an oracle that churns out messages that are indecipherable for humans. Bacon, Jean Claire tells us, had on the wall of his studio photographs of Himmler and Goebbels, his face transfigured by the grimace of words become screaming. This pictorial document of the “brownest years”, as Gabriel Ferrater put it, is quite appalling enough and will remind us forevermore where the loss of the human name and face leads. Man, a number, man an animal before being shot down.

Ricoeur is conscious that the desire to create a universal thinking would rob the world of the beauty of diversity. But he is too rigid in his distinction between the I and the Other and makes it impossible to fit hybrid identities into his theory.

Even today, psychoanalysis is still a useful tool as a checking measure when it comes to explaining apparently unconscious twists in writing, although it is no axiom that functions like a mathematical formula which, with the same variables, always produces the same result. Paul Ricoeur’s notion of the “translating impulse” has its *tertium comparationis* with sex in the impossibility of attaining complete satisfaction. It is now two generations since the Rolling Stones capitalised on the energy of *I Can’t Get No Satisfaction*. But it is strange to think that translators translate blinded by the desire for failure, just as lovers seem to be guided by the blindness that has moths flying up to the light to die consumed by the fire of their passion.

Another connection that Ricoeur sets up, somewhat too breezily, is the conviction shared by religion and psychoanalysis that confession has a cathartic effect —and the use of the Greek term *katharsis*, which tends to be understood as purging (abreaction) by Freud, is no accident. One only has to read Paul Celan’s poem “Frankfurt, September” and the eloquent commentary on it by Arnau Pons in his book *Celan, lector de Freud* (Celan, Reader of Freud) to understand that this “memory work” is insufficient. No confession, lay or religious, can substitute the arduous endeavour of consciously eliminating the blind spots that protect the past. More than philosophers or doctors, poets are the ones who have the strength to dare to put into words what the veils of convenience conceal. Hence, in theoretical works, Celan’s accusatory poetry is always blunted yet

again and defined, as Ricoeur also describes it, as “bordering on the untranslatable, bordering at first on the unspeakable, the loathsome, at the heart of his own language”.

Art is upsetting because it dares to say things. Jeff Koons offends with the strident colours of his objects of desire, enormous porcelain sculptures that ridicule the display window of any wedding list shop. The anthropomorphic vacuum cleaner, locked up in a glass case without ever having been used, is a kind of virgin, while Cicciolina is the star of an excessively real

Manet-style *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.

However, the critics almost always consider that such kitsch has no other aim than that of bringing high culture closer to the masses so that the unschooled spectator can finally recognise its references in works exhibited in museums. Yet the belly of Koon's Playboy bunny, “Rabbit”, with a silvery carrot in its paw, has been turned into a mirror and,

with these two weapons, it destroys, deforms and shatters even the most troublesome desires. Everything will be taken from you, it says with a mocking smirk from its factory of the ready-made. The child's floater in the form of an amusing tortoise has the foot-holes covered over, while the inflatable boat is almost identical to the one in the shop except Koons' boat is made of rusty iron and will never float.

Another very different example of how too-painful truth makes us close our eyes may be found in Maria Barbal's novel *Pedra de tartera* (Mountain Scree), which I have just translated. Conxa's monologue in which she gathers up the steps of her life comes to a standstill for a few moments on a forest track. By then her children are grown up, her husband is dead but life goes on, and she sums up these thoughts in just a few words: “[...] I thought, on the way home, that they didn't need me any more. It was a new idea, like a ray of sunlight that had filtered down through the branches and blinded my eyes.” It is hard to see the truth, not because the light of revelation is too bright, but because it hurts. Conxa's pain is the sudden disclosure that her life has reached a point of no return. Her old age in her children's flat in Barcelona, exiled from her ancestral home in Pallars, is sad. Yet, in this final transformation of her character, Barbal manages to describe the wretchedness that most batters so many other displaced people. The grannies seated in their chairs without speaking, incapable of any communication with their new setting, constitute the furniture that is almost never lacking in the flats of exiles. Without having left local landscapes at all, Barbal manages to bestow dignity on the condition of those who are forced to live within the blind spot. Forgotten lives, lives on the fringe that recover a voice. In contrast, El Hachmi's *L'últim patriarca*, however much it talks of wider horizons, does not manage to shed light on this corner of the house and, in this novel, anything weak disappears into the blind spot.

A lack of “hospitable literature” does not only affect the Catalan language, which becomes impoverished. Perception of others, the way of thinking about difference and otherness,

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seems to have been affected by this blind spot that accentuates the weakness of a culture that is too self-sufficient. The problem is not reduction of references to the local level. It is not enough to situate the works of Albert Sánchez Piñol within the genealogy of the fantastic novel alone, but one should ask very clearly how his novels are related with the Catalan situation, with the setting in which his literature has been written. And, only thus does this reflection on the IRA terrorist who ends up in the southern seas turn out to be a simple utopian tale in comparison with the treatment given to the same issue in Jaume Cabré's *L'ombra de l'eunuc* (The Shadow of the Eunuch).

Sánchez Piñol and Cabré are among the most translated Catalan-language authors but it becomes difficult to compare the way their literature acts and the focus from which

each one deals with the issues of his country. El Hachmi and Barbal, too, could soon become a similar pair. Africa reduced to an "acceptable" portrait, acceptable because it fits with the preconceived image we have of its inhabitants and, on the other hand, a deep-running Catalonia that, with some memory work, makes one feel beneath one's feet the sharp edges of scree, even where there is none.

It is worrying to see that, in the literature of some young Catalan authors, xenophobic sentiments have found a niche and that an inexplicable

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paranoia *vis-à-vis* foreigners is growing therein, this in a world full of travels in which the only frontiers are administrative. The Berlin Wall no longer exists and the Great Wall of China is a tourist attraction. Yet the barriers of transparent glass in airports with an official behind the little window, who has to put the stamp in your passport, are equally effective. This is the world of which we speak. Literary translation does not exist in places where there are no roads, or schools, or codified language or enough money to buy the rights of written stories. The literary exchange is an implacable analysis of the injustices of the global world. In Europe today, it is practically impossible to convince a publisher to bring out a translation unless it is financed in the country of origin. Do you imagine that the Chinese State would fund a dissident author? How can we make the arrival of information about cases of repression dependent on official money? Catalonia needs to think much more consciously of itself as a country of reception that has mechanisms for leaving the door open, and also for knowing about everything that is smaller and weaker.

A translation that is produced outside the dictates of the market is a thread so fine, so desperately imperceptible and frail that at times it seems that it does not even exist. Yet the living weave of universal literature is nourished by this sap, by the individual capacity of people to stick their necks out and look over the frontier that has been imposed.

At the end of September 2008, there was a meeting of Jesús Moncada's translators in Mequinensa. Igor Marojević, the Serbian translator and writer, spoke there of his experience of translating *Camí de sirga*⁶ and the response of readers in his country.

I fear that there is an underlying reason that explains the fact that none of the major novels translated from Catalan—not even Josep Pla’s *El quadern gris* [The grey notebook] or Mercè Rodoreda’s *La plaça del diamant*— have merited as much as a single review. From the start, of course, it’s again being repeated that a small literature can’t find any value in any other equally small literature. But another deeper reason lies with the aesthetic tendencies resulting from the Balkan Wars in the 1990s. Public discourse has been markedly oriented to the past and many literary authors have attempted to offer some kind of catharsis on the national level because politics has failed. This has meant that most critics have settled for the myth instead of seeking historical truth, which also means that they prefer the model of the nineteenth-century novel to postmodern or twenty-first-century narrative. There is not a single critical piece that has yet been able to come to terms with the incredible fact that, in Serbia today, more fiction of the nineteenth-century realist style is being written than works of neorealism, and that there is more narrative dressed up as the historical novel than works that consciously work with metafiction.

Marojević has translated Moncada because of the irony exuded by every line of his text and because he admires Moncada’s ability to reconstruct the past through the small stories of ordinary people. Although the translation has not awoken professional critics from the spell cast over them, Moncada has found complicity among Serbian readers who have read his book about the flooding of the town of Mequinensa and seen it as being akin to *The Bridge on the Drina*, the novel of the Bosnian Nobel Prize laureate Ivo Andrić. Two novels about a river that impassively flows past human constructions have thus found readers who are able to weigh up their content. With this, the epic that prevails in present-day Serbian fiction has fitted in a small loophole. One cannot measure the effect a translation might have by the number of copies sold. And that’s that. In order to pry into dark corners where the most uncomfortable truths slumber we need the help of those literary works that have been able to grow out of weakness ■

■ ⁶ Published in English, in the translation of Judith Willis, as *The Towpath* by Harpercollins, 1995 [translator].