

Carme Arenas

Literary translation

Influence and legacy

Culture's importance lies not only in the creation of new works but also in its ability to absorb and turn external influences into new cultural phenomena that attract outsiders. This two-way trip is of a circular nature and it has to be made if a culture is not to lose vigour and be written off as second- or third-rate.

Minority cultures are often good at bridging the gaps between bigger and more dynamic cultures at any given point in time. In the case of literature, this bridging role is played through translation, which often means the work not only reaches natives in the target tongue but also foreigners who can read in that language.

TRANSLATION. A BRIDGE BETWEEN CULTURES

Catalonia and all the Catalan-speaking countries have at one point or another in history played this bridging role. Catalan acted as a sounding board for great cultural movements, which were not only incorporated in its own literature but were also passed on to major cultures. Furthermore, the trends and influences exhibited in these works helped revitalise Catalan culture and provided useful insights for others.

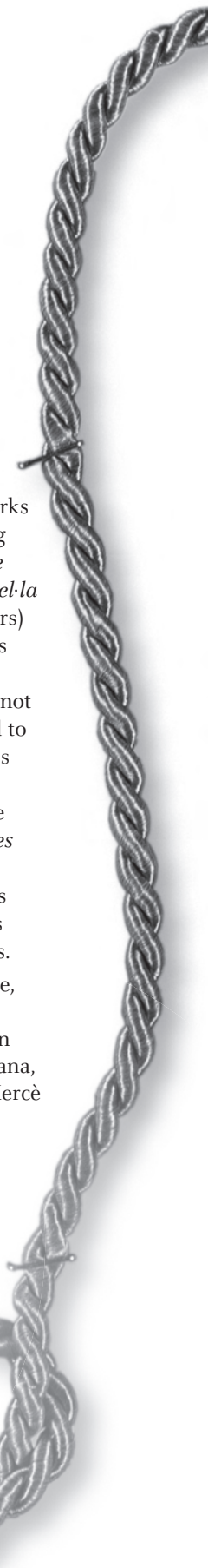
In the mid 11th century, Ripoll Monastery had 245 volumes that had been hand-copied by the monks. Many of these were a legacy of Arab culture and the knowledge these works contained flowed from Ripoll to Europe. The first translation of *The Divine Comedy* was made by a Catalan, Andreu Febrer, in 1429. It was the same year an anonymous translation of *The Decameron* was made by the monks of Sant Cugat monastery. In the

royal chancellery, Bernat Metge and Antoni Canals not only introduced the Latin classics but also echoed humanism by translating Petrarch to Catalan.

The last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th were marked by burgeoning literary translation in Catalan. This was driven by the urge to modernise Catalan

culture. The result was a spate of translations of books by major authors, first of works published in France and, later on, of those published in Britain. They featured rising stars in the European literary firmament. Collections such as *Biblioteca Universal de l'Avenç*, which contained important works, *La novel·la d'ara* (The Novel Today), *Novel·la Catalana* (Catalan Novels), *Biblioteca dels grans mestres* (Library of the Great Masters) and *Editorial catalana* as well as those by short-lived firms all published translations by the best writers of the time. Translation and the press helped professionalise the writer's craft. Having a corpus of translated —although the translations were often not from the original tongue but rather through a third language— French, English and to a lesser extent German authors, greatly enriched Catalan by introducing new themes and styles. The modernisation and opening up of Catalan literature was also aided by the publication of works drawing on the classical Greek and Latin traditions. The publishing house Editorial Barcino was founded in 1924 and its collection *Els nostres clàssics* (Our Classics) brought reading and contemporary writers within the reach of the common man. Another publishing house, Edicions Proa, sprang up four years later and not only added a large number of translations of works by popular writers of the time but also offered authors and works hitherto unknown to Catalan readers. The first books included works by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Dickens, Hardy, Wilde, Verga and Turgenev. These were later followed by Proust, Zola, Stendhal, Zweig, Chekhov, Moravia, Strindberg and Walter Scott, together with contemporary Catalan authors such as Joan Puig i Ferrer (who ran the publishing house), Prudenci Bertrana, and Teresa Vernet. A later wave of Catalan writers in the Proa collection included Mercè Rodoreda, Francesc Trabal and Xavier Benguerel. In just one decade —1928-1938— the collection added over forty foreign works, some of them translated directly from the original language. This was the case of the Russian classics, which were translated by two writers —Andreu Nin and Francesc Payarols— who were both steeped in the language. The latter was also a great friend of Marcel·lí Antich, one of Proa's founders. Works by over twenty Catalan authors were also published. This output was cut short by the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship that followed it. Proa did not resurface until the 1950s and then in association with Editorial Aymà. No effort was made to translate the main contemporary writers again until the 1960s with the founding of Edicions 62, which published the *El Balanci* collection in 1965 and the *El Cangur* collection ten

Having a corpus of translated authors from other literatures greatly enriched Catalan by introducing new themes and styles



years later. The jewel in the crown was *Les millors obres de la literatura universal* (The finest works of world literature). *El Balanci* included authors such as Pratolini, Faulkner, Calvino, Green, Pavese, Brecht, Pasolini, and Duras translated by Manuel de Pedrolo, Maria Aurèlia Capmany and Carme Serrallonga. The works in *Les millors obres de la literatura universal* were co-published with La Caixa savings bank. Begun in 1981, it was the first collection dedicated solely to translation. It was just at that time that the market for books in Catalan began to find its feet. The first translators with academic training (particularly in philology) began to graduate from universities, helping to meet the needs of the growing industry. Publishing houses continued to add the great writers of world literature to their catalogues. In many ways, they were making up lost ground, given that the Franco dictatorship had prevented them from publishing in Catalan in the previous four decades. The new generation of translators were generally well prepared for the task. While heirs

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to literary Catalan, it also fell to them to render acceptable spoken Catalan, no easy task given that the language was banned and stigmatised under the dictatorship and had become debased with Spanish vocabulary and syntax. This was a gap the translators had to fill because it would take at least a generation for schools to remedy the impact of an education

imparted solely in Spanish. This is why some of the translations of the time lack the range of registers found in European or American novels. This situation continued throughout the 1980s and part of the 90s. A sea change occurred at the end of the 20th century in the publishing business. The big publishing houses began to show much less interest in the classics and became the willing slaves of market forces. This was reflected in their translation of foreign best-sellers. The result was that publishers shunned the idea of producing a catalogue of untranslated world classics. Publishers chose books with a view to making a quick buck rather than for their literary merit. This turn of events coincided with a steady stream of professional translators. These had been trained in the translation faculties that sprang up in the 1990s. The newcomers had sound theoretical training and swelled the supply of translators. As a result many publishers started cutting corners, paying translators slave wages, imposing absurdly tight deadlines and splitting up books between four or more translators. The deadlines and sweatshop methods meant there was no time to review and edit translations. Quality plummeted as a result. As André Shiffrin put it, the problem was of “publishing without publishers”¹. It seemed that publishing houses were no longer interested in producing a sound catalogue and adopting an editorial

■ ¹ *L'Édition sans éditeur*, Éditions La Fabrique, 1999

line. The relationship between publisher and translator had changed for the worse and the old pride of adding something of cultural value no longer counted for much.

These developments have led us to the current pass. The fickle market rules supreme and there is no longer any cultural continuity. Matters are decided not in the publishers' and reviewers' offices but in the haggling at book fairs. Moreover, because the market for Catalan books is a small one, the translated works that are published are often full of mistakes of both a linguistic and a cultural nature. This is a pity because it often means a unique opportunity is lost. In such a tight market, there is often no space for new translations.

TRANSLATION AND THE MARCH OF TIME.

MODERNISATION, RETRANSLATION OR TINKERING?

Translations, like everything else, are also affected by the march of time. Mainstream cultures produce new translations of key works to attract a new generation of readers and to spark wider debate on the works themselves. Retranslations thus reveal changing perspectives on a work over time. As things now stand, the big Catalan publishing houses prefer to reprint old translations every now and again than to furnish new translations meeting the needs of today's readers. No doubt they do so for economic reasons but that hardly helps literature. Another bad practice is to "modernise" historic translations, failing to see that the old version is a linguistic document that helps us chart the course of Catalan. They are part of a cultural legacy that should be left intact for readers. We should remember that every translation contains implicit cultural features, which in turn influence and meld with the culture represented by the target language. These influences

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cover eating habits, lifestyles, ways of dressing and so on. We could not grasp these behaviour patterns were it not for translated literature. The same could be said of our concept of time and space. Translation helps pin down the past and in so doing, helps explain the present. It also helps Catalan grow by finding solutions stemming from other languages. Many of these translations were made by our best writers. Who, in their right mind, would dare give them a modern gloss? Only a knave or a fool would "modernise" Josep Carner's superb translation of Dickens, Gabriel Ferrater's translation

of Kafka's *The Trial* or Andreu Nin's translation of Pushkin, to give but three examples.

It is vital that the past effort and skill put into translation is not frittered away because of the dictates of today's market. Many of the translations made in the 1980s and 90s cannot be found in bookshops, let alone those from further back. An example springs to mind and it is far from unique. The effort made in

just three years (1985-87) to recover the main writings of Italo Svevo was quite possibly wasted. His works have vanished without a trace from bookshops.

Any culture worth its name is not simply one that preserves what it has but is rather one capable of exercising new influence and fascination through new translations. Initiatives such as the *Pompeu Fabra* collection —now sadly vanished— was the only attempt to systematically put the modern versions of the great works of literature at the disposal of Catalan readers. Some small publishing houses still buck the industry trend and publish old translations or contribute new ones. However, that is no excuse for the Catalan publishing industry and cultural institutions shirking their duty. They ought to fill the gap, furnish historic translations and make an effort to keep catalogue items stocked. If that is too much to ask, they could at least consider building a translation bank so that this literary and cultural legacy is not lost forever II

Carme Arenas Noguera is a philologist, translator and editor. Her translations include works by Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Svevo, Sciascia, Calvino, Bontempelli and Eco.

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