

**COLLECTION UNESCO D'ŒUVRES
REPRÉSENTATIVES**

**UNESCO COLLECTION
OF REPRESENTATIVE WORKS**

UNESCO's programmes in favour of literary translation

History and perspectives

By **Mauro Rosi**, Programme Specialist

UNESCO, Sector of Culture, Division of Arts and Cultural Enterprise

(The opinions expressed here by Mr Rosi in his personal capacity do not necessarily reflect UNESCO's position and do not imply the Organization's responsibility)

It is often said that music is a universal language. However, it is legitimate to question the validity of a term such as "language" to denote a tool that rarely conveys precise or precisely determined values, ideas and information. For, while music can easily travel and be enjoyed throughout the world, crossing borders and frontiers, ideas or conceptual contents cannot. When they travel through different languages and cultures, concepts need to be translated and adapted. Intercultural dialogue is unthinkable without translation. Literary, philosophical and conceptual translation in general are unsurpassed instruments of recognition, of mutual knowledge and of dialogue between peoples and a unique vehicle for the circulation of values and ideas. In this sense, historically translators have often been, and nowadays still are, important actors in the movement of humanity towards dialogue, and translation constitutes a fundamental cornerstone of this edifice, constantly in need of consolidation in terms of democracy, human rights and freedom.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), whose main constitutional objective is creating peace in the hearts of human beings, relies on literary translation as one of the essential means at its disposal to attain this goal. UNESCO has been developing programmes which support literary and philosophical translation since its foundation in 1948 and intends to continue.

So, once created, UNESCO took responsibility for continuing the Index Translationum, the only bibliography of translation started by the Société des

Nations before World War Two. And in 1948 UNESCO also created a subsidy-based co-operation programme called the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works. Its aim was to encourage the translation, publication and distribution in the major languages—English, French, Spanish and Arabic—of works of literary and cultural importance which were not well known outside their original national boundaries or linguistic communities. For more than 50 years (from 1948 to 2001), this objective has been put into practice by directly financing translation and publication (or co-publication with UNESCO) of works chosen by the UNESCO secretariat, on the basis of recommendations formulated by individual Governments, publishers or translators.

The works that have been translated under this cultural co-operation and exchange programme have been published as co-editions in partnership with publishers from all over the world. To date, the list of these works contains some 1,400 titles from more than 80 countries, translated from 100 or so different languages. Over 300 of these works have run to several editions or been reprinted. The bibliographic list of the “Collection” covers a very broad spectrum and includes works representative of contemporary minority cultures and languages as well as traditional works. A number of authors have achieved international recognition following the translation and publication of their works as part of this Collection. Examples include the Nobel Prize winners Yasunari Kawabata, Vicente Aleixandre, Ivo Andrić, George Seferis, Halldor K. Laxness and Wislawa Szymborska, all of whom were hitherto little known or even completely unknown outside their respective linguistic communities.

In this sense, the example of Kawabata is very revealing. He attained international recognition in the 1950s with the publication, through UNESCO, of the translation of his novel *Yukiguni* (Snow Country) into English (1956), German (1957), Italian (1959), French (1960) and Indonesian (1972).

This programme has played a vanguard role for years, opening unexplored paths to world literatures, and showing the way to national and international publishers.

But the success of this programme, which certainly contributed to the diversification and growth of the international literary book market of the 80s, made it gradually obsolete.

In fact, discovering foreign literatures gradually became more and more common; many other bodies, both private and public, as well as a certain amount of publishing houses, started to do the same as UNESCO, each of them in their specific professional area. Firstly, national support institutes like the *Centre National du Livre* in France, or the *Irish Literary Exchange* or the *Insti-*

tute for Hebrew Literature helped to spot good works and financed their translation. Secondly, NGOs like the *Gesellschaft für die Förderung der Literatur von Afrika, Asien und Lateinamerika* in Germany or the *African Book Collective* in the UK supported the development of the literary book industry in developing countries. Thirdly, publishers discovered that new foreign literatures do have a market and made catalogues richer and more authoritative.

UNESCO gradually understood that many others—more specialized and better equipped in terms of materials and professional resources—were following its example. UNESCO was about to lose its comparative advantage in this field. At the same time, the concept of ‘representativeness’, on which our action had been launched and based, became increasingly complex, questionable and uncertain because of the higher level of knowledge and understanding of world cultures and literature.

In this new context, UNESCO’s vanguard action was becoming routine. UNESCO could no longer act as one amongst many little publishing houses, identifying, translating and publishing works on the basis of random suggestions from publishers, translators, Member States or authors. In the late 90s we were forced to recognise that our action in this field had to change. We needed a new strategy.

The analysis of the present situation shows both discouraging and encouraging signs concerning the international literature market. In today’s globalized world, foreign literature has experienced a boost unprecedented in the history of culture and publishing. But despite the quantity and quality of texts translated and published yearly throughout the world, the variety, quality and ‘representativeness’ of those in the global market cannot be taken for granted, because of the latter’s intrinsic asymmetry. In a book market increasingly oriented towards easy entertainment, cultural content has become a difficult issue for all those involved in the book chain.

Consequently, although the publishing market is much more varied and wide-ranging than in the past, it still remains necessary to promote cultural diversity and pluralism within it.

To contribute to the achievement of the above fundamental goals, we still have to encourage literary translation by making life easier for all those producing translations of literature in the world, so that they can increase the quantity and improve the quality of their translations.

But how? The philosophical formula says that every human being has to act in conformity with his or her nature. We think that this prescription also applies to the literary book market: every active member in the world of literary translation and publishing should do what he/she is entitled to do and what he/she can do best.

In fact, one of the fundamental characteristics of the current situation is a much wider mass of professionals in this field (publishers, translators, national support institutes, sponsors), making up a sort of complex “translation chain”. In this chain, every individual element is related to the others but has its own function.

Agents and national institutes have to select new works. Translators have to translate. Publishers have to publish. Foundations have to finance. International organisations, be it at sub-regional, regional or global level, have to build bridges over all kinds of borders, be they linguistic, geographical, political or cultural.

In this context, we are convinced that there are many ways to encourage literary translation, each of them being characterised by a specific target (or beneficiary) to be identified in the translation chain and by a specific modality of intervention.

Every single element of the book chain can be assisted by providing financial help, information services, logistical backing, political or networking advocacy, project engineering and training.

Another way to help literary translation is to facilitate contacts in the translation chain itself, by supporting the self-recognition of the members of the chain. Given its cultural and international nature, this is the role UNESCO can play best.

Currently, UNESCO aims to play an innovative role in connecting the different professionals involved in the translation chain at international level. By doing so, it intends to transform them into an effective global network, and more, into a community in which every national, linguistic or regional subgroup, without renouncing its own perspectives and interests, recognises its vital links with the whole.

Its action is based on a unique and easily accessible tool, regrouping all UNESCO’s relevant institutional functions (clearing house, forum of ideas, catalyst for international co-operation, normative guidance). This tool is an information centre — the UNESCO Clearing House for Literary Translation — mainly accessible by a website (www.unesco.org/culture/lit) that provides news

from the international protagonists of literary translation, reference information, links to pertinent sites, classified lists of representative literature and opportunities to participate in mobilisation initiatives. One year after its launching, the Clearing House for Literary Translation is already a reference resources web site among the members of the international literary translation community: over 10,000 visitors of the site are recorded every month, while the Clearing House is in contact with some 500 partners all over the world, and relies on a professional network comprising some 50 national and international organizations.

Some of the terms mentioned above probably need further explanation. What do we mean by “classified lists of representative literature”? And what are the “mobilisation initiatives” we have referred to?

One of the services that we wish to offer to professionals in the literary translation and publishing sectors consists of providing historical and contemporary literary heritage lists able to facilitate the work of identifying texts for translation and publication. We have just published on our site a collection of national lists of reference works—novels in this case—recommended for translation by the National commissions of UNESCO’s Member States. The titles of those lists will also be, advertised through the Frankfurt Book Fair online catalogue, which is the most important tool of the negotiation of rights in the world. Another example of these lists is the list of the Society for the promotion of literature from Africa, Asia and South America (based in Frankfurt), established after consultation with the on-field organisations which specialise in locating quality texts from regions lacking editorial opportunities.

The mobilization initiatives we launch, promote or back, aim at a general sensitization and mobilization in favour of literary translation and its protagonists (stakeholders). The status of translation, the diversity of editorial supply, the need to discover new literatures by bringing them out of the darkness of ignorance, all form part of our endeavour and commitment. As part of an initiative conceived in collaboration with us, the International Federation of Translators has for instance launched a *Manifesto of Authors, Literary Publishers and Translators for Cultural Diversity*. Conceived by the International Federation of Translators (FIT) as its contribution to the work of UNESCO, this manifesto (which may be signed on line: www.fit-ift.org) aims to encourage all those professionally engaged in the field of literary translation to commit themselves to an output that is culturally diverse. To date, the Manifesto has been supported by some 7,000 people (individual signatures plus collective adhesions). The

Manifesto is at present available in some ten different languages, and it is being translated in several other tongues all over the world.

By drawing the attention of each of the elements of the literary translation world to their common interests and responsibilities, we are trying to stimulate the creation of a community which is now fragmented and virtual rather than real. And we are now working at fostering the community consciousness of the different national institutes providing help at national level for the translation of different national or linguistically homogeneous literatures, like the Irish Literature Exchange, the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature or the Arts Council of England.

Although these institutes have been created to represent the national or linguistic interests of their countries or “commonwealths”, we are convinced that their role is fundamental today in order to promote and reinforce cultural diversity in the globalized literary book market. Without renouncing their basic daily mission, they can collaborate in many different and useful ways, first and foremost by exchanging information and facilitating negotiation between publishers, namely on rights issues. And in fact, in London, on 18 March, some 40 organizations supporting and financing translation, from Europe and Africa, have produced a common declaration of intention by which they commit themselves to work together under UNESCO’s umbrella, to share information and actions linking North and South, to improve literary and scientific translation in number and quality. In this news context, some interesting projects are already being developed in the field of training, subsidy, statistics and information.

But what about the Collection of Representative Works? Is it dead or alive? We have chosen to keep the concept, but to adapt it to the new functioning of our programme. Therefore, instead of providing direct subsidies, UNESCO mobilises today all possible national institutions and associations in charge of book policy, promotion of translation and literary research, with a view to implementing together translations and publishing initiatives. In this way, the Clearing House supports the translation and publication of representative works selected and published with the highest quality standards. And all the titles published in this way are included in the virtual Collection of Representative Works, now available on line through the Clearing House.

In the last biennium, the Clearing House for literary translation has labelled as titles of the Collection 21 publications translated from some 15 different languages and published in English, French, or Arabic.

The development of literary translation is a matter of common interest, vital for the future of our multiple cultures; a matter of common interest to be tackled in a collaborative and coordinated way. We are all, *you* are all, responsible for it. Public, joint commitment from everyone involved in the chain is the key to individual success for each of you. And the International Federation of Translators can do a lot in this sense.

La Collection Unesco a pour but de contribuer à l'appréciation mutuelle des cultures par une aide à la traduction, à la publication et à la diffusion d'œuvres littéraires écrites dans des langues de diffusion restreinte. Créée en 1948, elle compte maintenant quelque 1000 titres représentant environ 80 littératures différentes.

Pour tout renseignement:

Collection Unesco d'œuvres représentatives
Division éditoriale et des droits
Editions UNESCO 1, rue Miollis
75732 Paris Cedex 15
France

CULTIVONS
2001-2010 DECENNIE INTERNATIONALE
DE LA PROMOTION D'UNE CULTURE DE LA NON-VIOLENCE
ET DE LA PAIX AU PROFIT DES ENFANTS DU MONDE



LA PAIX

