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TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA

IS LITERARY TRANSLATION A DYING ART?

Funding may be increasing, but the field lacks opportunities for newcomers • BY SUZANNE GARDNER

Despite the sorry state of the economy in 2009, literary translators in Canada can actually expect a pay raise this year, thanks to new funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage. Over the next four years, the National Translation Program for Book Publishing will funnel an additional \$5 million toward books translated between the two official languages. The new monies are being divvied up through an increase in the per-word translation rate paid out by the Canada Council for the Arts, which is administering the program. Effective April 1, those rates have been upped by a minimum of 25%: from \$0.14 per word to \$0.18 for fiction, literary fiction, and children's books; from \$0.16 to \$0.20 for drama; and from \$0.20 to \$0.25 for poetry. The funding limit for a single project has also been raised, from \$20,000 to \$25,000.

THERE IS A KEEN AWARENESS OF THE NEED TO SEDUCE AND TRAIN THE NEXT GENERATION OF TRANSLATORS

However, most Canadian publishers do not supplement the Canada Council rate, so even with the funding increase, the pay for literary translators is only a small fraction – about two-thirds or less – of the going rate for commercial work. Furthermore, only a handful of companies regularly publish work in translation, and the ones that do are doing so less and less. “It’s risky in the sense that ... there still is, I think, a resistance amongst readers to reading work in translation,” says House of Anansi Press publisher Lynn Henry.

For young translators, the low fees and lack of opportunities are huge barriers of entry into the field of literary translation. With so few translated texts being published in Canada each year, publishers are able to maintain the status quo by employing their established stable of translators. But as the

old guard continues to get, well, older, the state of literary translation is at risk of moving from stagnant to extinct.

“I think the biggest obstacle is actually creating a ‘field’ of literary translation,” explains Montreal-based poet and translator Oana Avasilichioaei. At 32, Avasilichioaei is a rarity – a young literary translator, one who has translated the work of Quebec poets Geneviève Desrosiers and Louise Cotnoir. A big part of the problem, she says, is cultural. “In much of North America the predominant language is English, and ... there is the idea that ‘we’ve got English, so why would we need anything else ...?’ It is really this idea that we need to challenge and change if we are to truly have a field of literary translation.”

A few programs do exist in Canada to help young translators begin a career in literary translation. Each year the Banff International Literary Translation Centre sponsors three graduate-level students (one each from Canada, the U.S., and Mexico) to participate in the centre’s three-week summer residency program, which is primarily geared to professional translators. Additionally, there are over half a dozen universities across the country with undergraduate and graduate programs in translation studies, most of which focus on the more lucrative areas of general and technical translation. As Linda Gaboriau, the founder of BILTC, puts it, “There is a real keen awareness of the [need for] anything we can do to seduce and possibly further train the next generation of literary translators.”

According to veteran translator Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, a former translation instructor at Concordia University, one of the biggest stumbling blocks for budding literary translators is not a lack of formal training, but rather a lack of worldly knowledge. “I’d give students literary work to translate and they found it very difficult to understand the references, the allusions, the subtext, the word play,” she says. “You have to have as much cultural baggage as you possibly can [to be an effective translator].” □