

Clare Azzopardi

No means no

Representing one's beloved country at a literature conference can be a trying experience, especially if it involves meeting Literature Officers (a non-existent breed in our country) who continuously boast about their country's writers and literary establishment, and talk about projects, literary activities, translations, EU collaborations, this year's literary budget, next year's increasing literary budget (amounting to thousands and thousands of Euro).

The worst moment of all comes when one is bombarded with questions to which one would really like to answer in the affirmative. Somehow, it turns out to be impossible, and all that comes out is: no, nope, none whatever.

- I assume that the Ministry for Culture in Malta has a fixed budget for literature?
- No.
- What do you mean, no?
- I mean no, as far as I know.
- So you're saying that this year there was no public money spent on literature, for publication, translation and the promotion of it both in Malta and outside Malta?
- No, none.
- By any chance, is there a Literature Centre in Malta?
- Nope.
- No?
- No, there isn't.
- So what you're saying is that Malta doesn't have a Literature Centre, with Literature Officers whose job it is to promote Maltese literature in Malta and in other countries?
- No.
- No Literature Officers ...
- None whatever.
- ... of the sort you find in countries like Latvia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia, Serbia, you know ... the UK and everywhere else ...
- Nope.
- Would you allow me to ask you a further question? Does Malta have what you would call Maltese literature?

And I am tempted to answer this one too in the negative. But I bite my tongue instead and remain silent.

I was representing Malta in Barcelona on Inizjamed's behalf. Inizjamed is the only non-governmental organisation, run by voluntary members, which promotes Maltese literature abroad. The conference? *Making Literature Travel* – a two-day conference organised by LAF [Literature Across Frontiers] and Ramon Llull Institute in Barcelona. The principal aims of the conference were to discuss and generate means of supporting literary exchange and translation in Europe. Several case studies were presented during the conference, case studies dealing with literature, the translation of literature and the dissemination of it in various European countries.

Something which occasionally threatened to provoke an outburst on my part was the realisation that the Maltese have a very laid-back attitude indeed where literature is concerned. To date, the people that work locally to enhance the literary scene continue to do so on a voluntary basis. This realisation came to me whenever I compared what I heard about other countries and regions to what is going on in mine. To take an example, Catalonia's budget for Catalan literature and its dissemination is phenomenal: between 1998 and 2003, literary works in Catalan were translated into 24 different languages, including Romanian, Polish, Serbian, Slovenian, Latvian and Czech.

Two reports – one written by Alexandra Büchler and Dr Sioned Puw Rowlands on behalf of LAF, and the other by Esther Allen on behalf of PEN in America – were presented at this conference. These reports are still in draft form, but should be published and presented to the European Union early next year, with the aim of increasing the budget for literary translation (especially where under-represented languages like Maltese are concerned).

I hear of the projects which other countries have for literature. I hear of their budgets: Slovakia had a budget of 26,264 Euro in 2005 for the translation of literary texts; in 2005 Slovenia had a budget of 78,300 Euro for the translation of literary texts; Hungary had a budget of 82,600 and Poland a budget of 273,900. What could I add to the list? Nothing. I simply remained silent. Incidentally, this ever-growing list comprises only funds for translation, as opposed to literary activities in general. For instance, Hungary and Latvia have a Writer's and Translator's House, where writers/translators are periodically invited to spend a couple of weeks to work on their writing or translation.

Alexandra Büchler and Dr Sioned Puw Rowlands have prepared a report in which there is a wealth of information about the literature of different European countries, its translation into various languages, its dissemination and the financial support each country gets from its Culture Ministry and its Arts Council. As you can probably imagine by now, the section entitled *Malta* reveals the following facts, among many others:

1. Statistical data on publishing and translation is generally unavailable, and it is impossible to make an assessment of the book market and draw comparisons with similar markets in Europe.
2. Unesco's *Index Translationum*, a publicly available database of translated works from different languages, lists a total of 29 translations into Maltese, and 12 translations from Maltese into other languages, the majority by poet and writer Oliver Friggieri.
3. It seems that Malta is the only EU-member state without a specific program of support dedicated to the development of contemporary writing locally and to its international promotion.
4. Contrary to what happens in other countries, the Malta Arts Council has taken on the role of an organiser of events rather than that of a funding and consultative body for independent arts organisations that propose their own projects.

As a result, I find myself thinking of how much money is spent annually on the Maltese contingent taking part in the Eurovision Song Contest, not to mention the amount that will be spent now that we are proud participants in the Junior Eurovision as well. I ask myself if there will ever be a fixed budget for Maltese literature.

Another question that arises is whether literature will ever form part of a Maltese Cultural Programme ... but perhaps Maltese culture is not *that* sort of culture. Or maybe there really is no literature in Malta after all!

Suggestions

The good thing about conferences like this is that one is bombarded with ideas. And so, rather than merely criticise, I would like to put forward some very practical suggestions. I would suggest that Malta, as a loyal member of the European Union, should have:

1. Literature Officers: This is not a job for volunteers. The job of a Literature Officer is to promote Maltese literature in Malta and outside the country by taking part in events such as international book fairs. Furthermore, their job is to help writers, poets, translators and publishers to take part in EU projects etc. etc.
2. A Literature Centre: This is the place where Literature Officers work.
3. An official programme with a sustainable budget for literature.
4. An Arts Council with an explicit programme for funding different sectors of the arts, as opposed to organising events or helping individual artists on an *ad hoc* basis.

Just in case you were asking yourself the question while you were reading this, here's the answer: No, I wasn't granted any money to go to this conference, whether by the Culture Ministry or the Malta Arts Council. My thanks for the financial support have to go to LAF and to the Ramon Llull Insitiute. The organisers of the conference *Making Literature Travel*, did invite Maltese government representatives, but none of them acknowledged the invitation.

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