

TRANSLATING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “TWO” IN BUÇPAPAJ’S *TWO SHEETS OF WIND*

By Gjekë MARINAJ

*Grace be unto you,
and peace, from him which is,
and which was, and
which is to come;
and from the seven
Spirits which are
before his throne
(Revelation 1:4)*

On August 20, 1997, CNN and other media sources reported that Mujë Buçpapaj, then the political editor of the RD newspaper and a prominent political activist, had been shot and seriously wounded. Following the details of the incident US reporters interviewed Genc Pollo, at that time the Albanian’s Democratic Party spokesman, who blamed “the ruling clique” (The Albanian Socialist Party, formerly known as the Communist Party of Albania) of being behind the assassination attempt for political reasons. Later conclusive reports indicated that the poet had received two bullets, one in each thigh, both of which were fired from a car that had on two police license plates. Yet, unless you are a literary translator, the significance of the number two in Mujë Buçpapaj’s *Two Sheets of Wind* is not indistinguishable with, for instance, seven in the Bible or in Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. For Claude C. Freeman III, however, translating its connotation into English must have been an enormous task. Whether it represents Buçpapaj’s second chance in life, the two political lives of his country (under communism and in democracy), the alternation between war and peace in Kosovo, or the love and hate that exist in today’s world the number two seems to remain a key word throughout his soon to be published book *Two Sheets of Wind*.

Nothing Buçpapaj writes is without self-awareness, nor is it ever without a specific poetic purpose. He is known as a poet who likes to crystallize the essential social and political events and make part of his poetic vision the troubles and the happiness, the beauty and the ugliness of his experiences. His verse is his sole witness whenever he finds himself in a complex mixture of personal trauma and fame, the center of constant political turmoil of his people and their life in peace, the heat of international anxiety and social disorder, and the magnificence of the natural beauty that surrounds it all. As complicated as it all sounds, it

is a mixture that often dominates Buçpapaj’s world. It is a reality that he encountered humanely and poetically and simultaneously reconstructed its impact into his verse before extending it to Freeman to translate into English.

And that is not a simple task. Because esthetically, particularly in terms of how he approaches his subject matter and utilizes his metaphors, Buçpapaj bears a resemblance to the American poet Ted Kooser. The poems of both poets consist of delicate metaphors, often within larger metaphors, so that the smallest misrepresentation in translation could alter the metaphor’s intended meaning, destroying its specific function in the poem. To illustrate this point, let’s direct our attention to the following stanzas taken from two poems, the first by Buçpapaj and the other by Kooser:

Man built
the other side of life and river
between rain and field
but wind will have its say.
(Buçpapaj’s “The wind’s portrait”)

All night, the cities,
like shimmering novas,
tug with bright streets
at lonely lights like this.
(Kooser’s “Flying at night”).

Clearly, both poets make it very difficult for any translator to reconstruct the elegance of the above lines and the internal layers of meaning they offer. Freeman has steered clear of the danger of either under-translating or over-translating. And that is important. Within that poetic frame, in addition to triumphing over the great degree of difficulty of translating multiple metaphors within a stanza of four short lines stanza, which stands as a metaphor in itself, Freeman has gone even further towards his goal of capturing the subtleties of the original. And, to paraphrase Hugo Friedrich, the creative stylistic power of the Albanian verse is visible in the translation, and it has even regenerated itself as the creative force stylistically in the English translation (Schulte and Biguenet 15). Furthermore, maintaining the conceptual hypothesis within the imagery with such

eloquent rendition of the original, as he does, can be considered nothing short of a remarkable translation.

Nevertheless, knowing that “translation is sin” (Showerman), such perfection is the exception rather than the rule throughout the book. *Two Sheets of Wind* consists of forty eloquent and heartfelt poems originally written in Albanian (an Indo-European language) that are linguistically and poetically entrenched in the Albanian culture. What’s more, Buçpapaj’s poems are abundantly composed in accord with the linguistic properties of yet a deeper localized northern culture within Albanian national culture. One of the greatest qualities of his work is that Buçpapaj makes the natural beauty of the Northern Albanian Alps, the awe-inspiring highlands of Tropoja, and the labyrinthine local language and tradition an integral part of his poetic distinctiveness. That being said, the process of transferring the original text into English has forced Freeman to make some tough decisions in translating Buçpapaj. Following is a short stanza from “The Field of Tplani,” one of numerous examples of the book where the poet contributes as much linguistically to the Northern dialect as he does to the Albanian poetic language. First, the Albanian version of the stanza:

Këneta e Madhe
Han prapë dhë nën brinjë
Të të vdekurve.

Next is Freeman’s translation of it, which serves as a direct reminder of Montaigne’s suggestion that “it is risky to translate those who have given their language much grace and elegance, particularly with a language of less power” including Albanian:

And the Big Marsh
Still eating the land
From under.

Before I offer my own version of translation, which I think is more faithful to the original text and perhaps the intended meaning, I must confess my agreement with Landers who kindly reminds us that “it is commonly thought that translators deal with words, but this is only partly true. Whatever their branch of translation, they also deal with ideas. And literary translators deal with cultures” (Landers 72). Now, here is my translation of the same stanza:

The Big Marsh
Still eats soil under the ribs
Of the dead.



Mujë Buçpapaj

On the one hand, as we see here, the translator added the conjunction “And” which is not present in the original text. Unsurprisingly, the word has been available to the poet when he composed the poem but he chose not to use it. Freeman has also changed the verb tense from *eats* to *eating*. But most importantly, he used the noun “land” instead of “soil” and omitted “the ribs of the dead,” the most important portion of the stanza. On the other hand, somehow the stanza still stands its ground, because Freeman’s editing did not fundamentally change the linguistic and poetic properties of the poem.

In effect, the overall fair accuracy of the translation throughout the book indicates that Freeman is a good literary translator. A good translator works with the fact in mind that the poet, the reader, and the translator are all engaged in the translation process. Together they spin new qualities, explore poetic labyrinths that might not have been explored in the original, and create new linguistic properties in the receptor language. In other words, the above stanza may have lost some of its intended meaning but has also gained new significance that might be as revelatory to the American reader as the original is to the Albanian reader. From this point of view, one has sufficient reason to consider as conditional the idea that “nothing which is harmonized by the bond of the Muse can be changed from its own to another language without destroying its sweetness” (Dante).

Even so, Freeman would probably agree with Dante,

knowing firsthand that translators are neither divine nor, unlike fiction writers, do they have the luxury of freely beautify, ruin or destroy the channels in which their respective *homo sapiens* or imaginary characters go through their predetermined life. Although fragments of poetry often do not readily translate into English and an affinity between the internal structures of languages is not always preset, in *Two Sheets of Wind* “translation moves between extremes—not literalism, not improvisation” (Felstiner 30). Despite the consequences of some small liberties taken by Freeman throughout the poems, most of the linguistic and cultural properties of the original Albanian as well as the poems’ social and historic aspects, have been transplanted without major artistic discrepancies. Even in instances where the English language contains no exact equivalent for nouns like “Tplani” or neologisms like “shpresëpërgjakur,” both of which carry significant weight in their respective poems, the translator has found a way to carry over the importance of the words, either by adding a footnote or by offering the closest possible alternative in their place. Naturally, the level of expertise and the case-specific research required to succeed over such hindrances suggest that literary translators must be as much scientists as artists in their work. They have to be, like Freeman, as considerate to the text of the author as neurosurgeons in operation. That essential quality of translation is often found in *Two Sheets of Wind*. I emphasize the word “essential” here, not only because Freeman has not ignored “lesser” words and has considered every jot and tittle before finalizing his decision (Gregory Rebassa in Biguenet and Schulte x) but also because he has shown an awareness that there are no inferior words in any language and that the poet’s choice to use a specific term for a specific situation should continuously be honored.

Such care has been applied to “The Powerboats”, one of the many eloquently translated poems of the *Two Sheets of Wind*. It serves as clear evidence that Freeman is considerate of Buçpapaj’s intellectual and poetic thoughts. Here he translates not words but situations, imagery, tones, internal rhythms, metaphors, and poetic forms. The poem is self-explanatory:

THE POWERBOATS

Riding the shade of the Adriatic
 Flying on a leaf
 A patient courage

Death behind
 Below
 Freedom ahead
 The Italian coast
 A relative paradise

A heartfelt poem like this, flawlessly translated, must have been the source of inspiration for the American poet Frederick Turner who asserts that:

“Buçpapaj’s poetry is like his Balkan land itself: a compacted bundle of tragic energies. In one sense he is a poet of great simplicity: his passionate images, almost surreal in their intensity, invoke the lovely world of nature that we all share to his noble moral intention. But his sensibility is also that of the sophisticated European, indeed the most ancient of the Europeans; and there is a blunt ironic recognition of the brutalities of life that can only come from experience of war (Promotional lines for the back cover).

Yet, an objective comparison in terms of overall quality and accuracy of translation between Buçpapaj’s first book *The Invisible Victory*, translated into English by (his cousin) Ukë Zenel Buçpapaj, and *Two Sheets of Wind*, translated by Freeman is almost unachievable. There are two different reasons for this: First, both books are products of a close collaboration between the two translators. Both, however, have maintained their own style in their respective translations. Second, the art of translation doesn’t allow translators to have assertion of perfection about their work, nor, therefore, can the reader have such expectations of the translators. I must say, though, the background and the experience of each translator has affected the outcome of each book in different ways. Here is an example of a stanza, taken from Buçpapaj’s signature poem “The invisible victory” that happened to be selected and translated by both translators:

The girl giving in
 In tall grass
 Shrouded only by shadow
 (Trans. by C. Freeman).

and

Girls gave in
 Under the grass
 Surrounding tree shadows (Trans. U. Buçpapaj).

A simple trot and a word per word translation of the original would be: (Getting) *defeated/crushed/overcome girls under the grass of the trees of the shade/shadow* give the edge of a more faithful translation to U. Buçpapaj. Yet the imagery has lost nothing of importance in Freeman's version either. A professor of Albanian literature and literary translation, Ukë Zenl Buçpapaj is an expert in translation theories of the past and an active participant in the development of the new ideas and methods to improve the contemporary art and craft of translation. That expertise is obvious in every poem of his translation in *The Invisible Victory*. Nevertheless, filtered through Freeman's artistic receptiveness, *Two Sheets of Wind* more often preserves than loses what Dante called "the glimmer" of poetry.

And that is a very important phenomenon in literary translation. To refer once more to Friedrich: "The attitude that the translator displays toward the individual stylistic characteristics of a work indicates whether the translator will yield to the original text or conquer it, whether he will stop at acknowledging the differences between languages or whether he will move toward a possible rapprochement of styles between languages" (Schulte and Biguenet 15). Both U. Buçpapaj and Freeman, of course, exemplify Friedrich's positive meaning in this thought.

It must be mentioned, however, that the poems translated by Freeman read a little better in English. It could be because, a graduate of Cornell University, Freeman is a published American author as well as an itinerant who continuously travels the world—an enduring personal dream that he started chasing shortly after graduation. Or it could be the fact that Freeman adds to his craft of translation not only the benefit of being a translated poet himself—an omnipresent topic of discussion among literary translators and theorists—but also because he brings to his translations an unparalleled intercontinental cultural backdrop the results of which are obvious throughout *Two Sheets of Wind*. Being born and raised in America and spending the past three decades of his life in Africa, Asia, and Europe (mostly in the Balkans) has given him an artistic advantage and an enlightening cultural ascendancy as a literary translator. His longtime involvement in diverse cultural and literary circles throughout the world have provided him with a speedier assessment and more comprehensive understanding of Buçpapaj's poetic world in particular and Albanian culture in general.

Whatever the source of his expertise might be, one thing is for sure: without Freeman, there would be no *Two Sheets of Wind*. Through him, Buçpapaj

gives us a comforting gift, a sense that poets like him still place themselves selfishly on the very edge of their lives so they can be better social observers and more instrumental on behalf of humanity through their work. Good literary translators are a worthy extension of such a great cause. After all, "no two literary texts are exactly identical with respect to the kinds of problems they pose. Each one of them becomes a new field of investigation for which translators have to design strategies of research" (Schulte 163). Yet translators continue to find ways to give literature a second life by directing it toward a greater platform from which it can be better understood and more accessible. That is the way it should be, because as one of Buçpapaj's poems has it, there is:

Not enough time
For Men

For Men
To do good

With that in mind, perhaps translators promote the authors and works they translate to greater prominence—a thing of beauty that most of them have yet to achieve for themselves as translators. In this sense, Freeman's decision to translate the *Two Sheets of Wind* is of great importance. Buçpapaj's poems truly deserve to exist in more than one language.

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