

Operation “Knights Errant”: In Search of the Holy Grail of Visibility

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Originariamente pubblicato nell'ATA *Chronicle*, (rivista dell'American Translators Association), vol. XXXIII, n. 2, febbraio 2004.

Recently I was looking through the presentation offerings for the 26th Annual Conference of the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA), held November 12-15 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when one session in particular caught my attention. Kathrin Razum's panel discussion, “Seeing Ourselves As Others See Us: The Self-Perception of Literary Translators and Their Standing or Perception in Their Respective Cultural Contexts,” suggested a comparison of how literary translators from various countries regard their professional image. Her proposal immediately called to mind a recent initiative undertaken by a group of literary translators in Italy associated with the online discussion list *Biblit*. Though I had followed the *Biblit* project from a temporal and geographic distance (from far-off California), I was closely committed and connected in spirit, and decided to share the details with Kathrin, since it seemed to fit right in with her topic. (Unfortunately, circumstances prevented me from actually participating in the panel at the conference.)

After I wrote to her about *Biblit*, Kathrin, an English-to-German freelance editor and literary translator from Heidelberg, Germany, responded: “What interests me is the interrelation between our ‘self-image’...and the way we are perceived by others, including the reading public as well as publishers, critics, etc.”

The initiative I told her about involved a group of translators, the majority of whom are based in Italy. Aware of the difference (although, gap or chasm might be a more accurate term!) between their own “self-image” as passionate, dedicated professionals and the way they are perceived by others (or not perceived at all), they decided to do something proactive to try to improve their professional image with those who come into contact with their work. Working together through the *Biblit* online discussion list, they prepared an open letter to members of the press who regularly and systematically “forget” to mention their names when reviewing or referring to the books they translate.

The initiative was dubbed the “Cavalieri Erranti,” or “Knights Errant,” taking its name from the definition provided by the Italian writing team of Fruttero & Lucentini. The preface to the letter quotes the duo as follows:

“The problem of translating is actually the very same as that of writing, and the translator is at the heart of it perhaps even more so than the author. He is asked [...] to master not just a language, but everything that lies behind it, that is to say, an entire culture, an entire world, an entire way of viewing the world. [...] He is asked to pull off this arduous yet impassioned effort without calling attention to himself. [...] He is asked to consider his greatest triumph the fact that the reader isn't even aware of him [...] an ascetic, an essentially selfless hero, ready to give his all in exchange for very little and to disappear into the twilight, anonymous and sublime, when the epic deed is accomplished. The translator is literature's last, true knight errant.”¹

According to Marina Rullo, Biblit's moderator, "Cavalieri Erranti," or "Knights Errant," is a battle cry chosen to represent the activist spirit of the group. She describes Biblit as a "virtual community" of translators. Having originated in 1999 as a simple electronic discussion list, Biblit has no formal or legal identity and no source of funding except for voluntary contributions from its participants. The list now has over a thousand members, and has become a major point of reference for literary translation from and into Italian.

The organization and synchronization of the initiative that launched the letter campaign was phenomenal. No one person was "in charge," but everyone took on whatever responsibility they felt they could handle. In a coordinated mailing, the letter was sent to major Italian dailies on a date chosen to coincide with the Turin book fair on May 9th. As might be expected (especially in a country like Italy, where the penchant for *raccomandazioni*, or who-you-know, has been developed to a fine art!), personal connections played a big role in who contacted which newspapers.

The letter itself was written as a surprisingly successful group exercise, and was made available on the Biblit website (www.biblit.it/cavalieri_erranti.htm) in several translations. (My own contribution was to provide the English translation.) The letter basically demanded "greater respect and just recognition" for the all-too-often overlooked figure of the literary translator: greater visibility for that individual who, though his or her name may appear on the book (I'm told that this is required by law in Italy), is frequently ignored by reviewers or others citing the work.

Supporters were invited to "sign" the letter on the Biblit website both before and after the synchronized mailing to the press. By the time the initiative had run its course, almost 950 signatures had been collected. Interestingly enough, only about one-third of those who signed were members of Biblit. Since Biblit had 900 members at the time, this means that 600 of them did not choose to add their signature to the letter. Despite speculations exchanged on the list, the reasons for this lapse remain unclear. The breakdown between translators and non-translators was perhaps more predictable: 80% of those signing the letter identified themselves as translators, though not necessarily literary translators, while 20% indicated that they were not translators.

All in all, it was an incredibly impressive display of coordination and group synergy! All the more remarkable when you consider that Biblit is an informal discussion group, that is, without the formal structure and support of a professional association. Its members are united only through their participation in the online discussion list and by their passion for literary translation.

But what about the outcome? Were there any tangible, lasting results? Opinions among Biblit members vary, depending to some extent on one's propensity to see the glass as half-full or half-empty. I am reminded of a favorite Italian tumbler I use at home. I call it my optimist/pessimist glass. It has a white line that circles around its mid-point: below this mid-line the script reads *pessimista*, above the line it reads *ottimista*.

Overall, I think it can be said that the response to the letter initiative was gratifying, especially some of the messages of support written by those who signed it. Still, in some respects, the comments from supporters were all over the map. One writer said that he was in favor of the immediate formation of a union and standardization of pricing, the latter being something that no one had ever mentioned or even wanted! A

journalist complained that he did not like the sketch of Don Quixote that accompanied the letter, saying that it made him think of a heraldic order for losers! He suggested an image that did not associate the role of the translator with the figure of the poor knight. Others were full of admiration for what the translator accomplishes. Perhaps one of the most unusual responses was that of an aspiring writer who wrote a brief message entitled: “Six Minutes and Twenty-Nine Seconds.” In translation it reads:

“I am an egregious nobody, a passionate reader and aspiring writer. I have paid homage to you by shutting myself in my room and reading your names aloud, chanting them. The time it took: six minutes and twenty-nine seconds. I have granted you the honor of my meager arms.
Best regards...”

But let’s get back to the results of the letter campaign. Once the letter was mailed, reaction from the press was eagerly awaited. Again, the feedback was mixed. Although the initial response from the press was encouraging, some publications printed only a concise version of the letter, and others did not find space to print the entire list of supporters. Some publications simply referred their readers to the letter on the Biblit website. But one journalist, who had once been a translator himself and hoped to be so again, headlined his piece “Translators in Revolt, ‘We Demand Visibility.’” And perhaps the most spectacular payback came when Italian President Carlo Azelio Ciampi, at the national awards ceremony for translation prizes for 2002, explicitly referred to the “Knights Errant,” citing the Fruttero & Lucentini passage and many of the concepts expressed in the letter (though not mentioning Biblit by name).

Despite such expressions of solidarity, there were those members of Biblit who felt the letter had little impact, that indeed it had been largely ignored by the press. There was a certain bitterness in some list members’ comments. One individual noted the astonishing abyss that exists between the sensibility of the press (“the journalists and critics who ignore us”) and the positive response on the part of readers, and suggested that the next step might be to create a bridge to unite these two worlds. However, she neglected to say how! Others, more positive in their outlook, suggested that the results were something to be proud of; that the press coverage achieved, including an early evening news segment and various appeals on Internet sites, was not a bad haul, not to mention the great number of signatures that had been collected, many of them from prominent individuals. Perhaps it was a matter of one’s expectations. In her practical way, Marina Rullo, Biblit’s moderator, reminded everyone that it had taken seven days to create the world, and that it would take much longer than that to change a mindset (especially since we weren’t equipped to perform miracles!). And yet, she went on, a miracle had indeed taken place: the success of having rallied hundreds of people around an idea, of having taken that positive step from generalized whining to concrete action.

Another member of the list summarized the experience as follows:

“Although there may have been some flaws here and there, in the end it was a satisfying experience of which everyone could be proud...The mission was accomplished in a short time, and at very little cost (if you don’t count the expenditure of personal effort), and was able to achieve broad consensus and a

fair amount of visibility and publicity...Whether it will have the desired result of ensuring that the translator's name is always cited by the press, remains to be seen...Moreover, the only way to be sure of this would be to set up a monitoring process by creating a so-called 'press watch' to act as watch dog...This would require some effort, however, and though citing the translator's name is important, perhaps it is not the primary battle to be fought...Perhaps we should aim higher, at the publishers themselves..."

Striving for balance, another translator shared her observations with me this way:

"On the one hand, the impact of the initiative in terms of 'immediate' visibility was remarkably outstanding and definitely surpassed all expectations, since it is no easy feat to get free advertising from press agencies, various national and local dailies, TV, and radio. Therefore, it's clear that the issue is at least considered important enough to be viewed as newsworthy."

She goes on to say that she feels the real "news" is the fact that translators are communicating among themselves, something unprecedented in Italy.

"On the other hand," she continues, "it seems to me that there have been zero results with respect to what we were demanding, that is, the systematic citation of the translator's name by everyone who reviews books in translation or cites passages from them. Those who used to do so, continue to do so; those who did not do so before, continue to not do so, that is, continue to ignore the translator, at least from what I can see."

Her solution:

"To attain our objective, I think we must seek a working alliance with publishers who, through their press offices, would compel newspapers to cite the translator along with other bibliographic data such as the number of pages and the price. This will not be easy, however. In part because due to fierce competition and the number of titles published each month, publishers are indeed grateful to be able to have one of their titles reviewed as opposed to one from their competitors, so that's more than enough for them. And in part because systematic attention paid to translators, and perhaps a 'good word' for the translation itself, would bring about a selection process among translators themselves, in which the most talented ones would stand out a little more and would rightfully begin to demand more money. Naturally, the publishers don't want this to happen, at least not those who mainly work in the mass market sector and who are more concerned with fast turnaround times for delivery rather than with the textual quality of the translation."

So what does all of this tell us about "self-image" and perception? About a proactive approach? Can a similar effort work elsewhere? Would it have similar results? During the course of what I've come to think of as "Operation Knights Errant," a number

of associations outside Italy were contacted (Ireland, Spain, Norway, and Belgium come to mind), and the letter also had the support of Ros Schwartz, chair of the European Council of Associations of Literary Translators. I personally made several attempts to contact literary translator organizations in the U.S. to inform them of the initiative and see whether they might want to be involved or show support in some way. The fact that I did not receive a response from any of these groups is definitely below the line on my optimist-pessimist glass.

Notes

1. Fruttero&Lucentini. 2003. *I ferri del mestiere (Tools of the Trade)*. Torino: Einaudi. (This and other English translations of sources cited are my own.)

Biography:

Anne Milano Appel specializes in commercial and literary translations from Italian into English. Formerly a director of public libraries, she has also taught English, Italian, and English as a Second Language, and holds a Ph.D. in Romance languages and literature. Several of her book-length translations have been published, and shorter works have appeared in other venues. Articles and reviews that she has written, edited, or translated have appeared in professional and literary journals such as the *ATA Chronicle*, *Tradurre*, *Beacons*, and *Forum Italicum*. Contact: aappel@aol.com.