

Open Letter to the press from a group of literary translators who participate in the discussion list Biblit, demanding greater respect and just recognition for the all-too-often overlooked figure of the translator, "literature's last, true knight errant", according to the epic definition of Fruttero&Lucentini.

Knights Errant of Literature

English version courtesy of Anna Milano Appel

«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 the fact that the reader isn't even aware of him his greatest triumph [...] 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».

(Fruttero&Lucentini, *I ferri del mestiere (Tools of the Trade)*, Einaudi, Torino 2003)

We are knights errant: sublime, we can't say, but we know anonymity all too well. We do not claim heroism, and twilight is the backdrop for all our days, but we are tired of letting it swallow us up at every endeavor.

We have first and last names, behind which lie a passion for a work that is nurtured in silence, as well as a bitter dose of frustration because the world we feel we have every right to occupy, the world of words, of literature, fiction and non-fiction, all too rarely notices and remembers us.

Our publishers, it's true, print our name on the title page, and some of the more daring ones even put it on the cover: they are bound to mention it by a law that protects creative derivatives of a work, «such as translations in another language», thereby rendering the artistic dignity of the translator equal to that of the author under the law. But only a few, honorable reviewers' voices concede full dignity to the figure of the translator, and the editors of cultural pages of newspapers and magazines who bother to indicate the translator's name along with other information are scarcely more numerous.

The same law affirms that summaries, citations or reproductions of an intellectual work must be «accompanied always by mention of the title of the work, and the names of the author, publisher and, in the case of a translation, the translator», yet the established practice is to replicate passages from a translated work within other texts or read them in the context of a program without ever citing the person who made that work available in our language.

In the light of this debasing, routine fact, we consider it only just to turn to the broader public in an attempt to break out of that eternal twilight that, while it may regard the nature of what we

do, does not reflect the full truth about our work. Though it is important that we remain discreet, we do not want to be invisible.

The fact that someone must certainly have dedicated several months of his/her life to translating the pages of a book not originally conceived in the reader's language may escape the general reader of that book... But we do not feel equally as indulgent toward those who are «insiders»: the critics, reviewers, editors of cultural pages, journalists, and hosts of radio and television programs in which books are spoken of.

We too exist; we too are part of the process that generates those very important items: books. Books that make you cry and make you laugh, books of love and sorrow, books that bring knowledge and allow escape, books that in some way touch people's hearts and minds, are due to us as well. We want our name to be there to confirm it and we do not want our work to pass unnoticed in silence.

A reviewer who lavishes praise on an author's style, lexical choices and linguistic acrobatics should feel it his duty to comment on its translated version if he has read the book in the original; and if he has read it in translation, he should remember that what he has read are the words, sentences, and rhythms chosen by the translator.

We demand just recognition at the same time that we are prepared to accept any qualified, well-founded criticism.

We are knights errant, and we are not afraid.