Portrait of a Translator: William Weaver and the Dissemination of Italian Literature in Postwar U.S.

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American translator William Weaver played an important role in the diffusion and appraisal of the Italian culture and literature of the second half of the 20th century in the United States of America. His profound love for Italy, the Italian people and culture, together with the experiences he gained in the country, shaped him in such a way that he developed a deep sensitivity for the language. This sensitivity allowed him to become successful in the creation and re-creation process of translation. This paper is an attempt to analyze some of the elements posing challenges to Weaver during the translation of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler)* by the Italian writer Italo Calvino, using the "positive" methodology proposed by Antoine Berman.

Keywords: William Weaver, Italo Calvino, If on a Winter's Night a Traveler, Antoine Berman, Henri Meschonnic.

1. Introduction

Some publishers, reviewers and readers consider translations acceptable if they seem to reflect the author's style and objective without presenting any peculiarity that might be tied to the translators' intervention. Along the same lines, American translator William Weaver applauds the lack of attention devoted to the work of the translator (Guarnieri 2007: 603) while believing that translation is an intimate act of reading, to the point that it becomes impossible to distinguish between the translator and the act of translating (Covi, Rose and Weaver 84-86).

William Weaver translated for the past 50 years some of Italy's finest post-war writers, playing an important role in shaping the international reception of modern Italian literature in translation. His translations brought international recognition for the writers he translated, and considerable acclaim for his translations. Among the dozens of works Weaver translated, one for which he achieved particular notoriety is *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*) by Italian writer Italo Calvino. Weaver's work played a major role in the transformation of Italo Calvino into a world-class writer, to such an extent that it is worth analyzing how Weaver himself contributed to the idea that being a

translator means not simply transferring a text into a different linguistic system from the one used in the original text. Translating literature means transferring not only words, but also the author's feelings and deeper intent, confirming the argument that the translators' intervention always lies behind a translated text (Hermans 2010: 198).

2. Methodology

This paper presents William Weaver and his translation of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*) (1979) following the "productive" methodology proposed by Antoine Berman (2009: 26), according to whom criticism should not primarily be performed evaluating the translation on the basis of the cultural, historical and ideological contexts. On the contrary, attention should be given to translators and their approach to the text.

Berman divides the analysis process into several steps. First of all, it is important to read the original text to identify the language and the style adopted by the author of the source text. Then, the critic would describe what Berman calls the "horizon of the translator" (2009: 57). The horizon includes biographical and psychological elements of the translator in order to understand his/her writing and his/her work. In order to understand the work of the translator, it is also important to be acquainted with information regarding his/her mother tongue, what languages he/she works with, whether translation is his/her only activity or if he/she has some other professional activities, if he/she has produced any literary work, and if so, what kind of works. The next step is to understand the translator's position in relation to the task he/she has to perform. By translator's position Berman means the "compromise between the way in which the translator […] perceives the task of translation, and the way in which he has internalized the surrounding discourse on translation (the norms)" (2009: 58). The fourth step is the analysis of the translation itself. Berman stresses that it is important for the critic to be familiar with previous translations in the same language, contemporary translations in that language, as well as translations in languages other than the target language. Finally, the fifth step Berman identifies is the confrontation between passages from the original text and their corresponding passages in the translation.

2.1 The horizon of the translator

William Weaver was born in 1923 and grew up in a family of bibliophiles and writers. Thus, when at the age of twelve he told his parents he wanted to become a writer, they approved with enthusiasm and bought him a typewriter as a present. After high school, Weaver was accepted at Princeton University. Weaver was in his sophomore year when Pearl Harbor occurred; this event changed many people's lives, including his. As a pacifist, he did not want to be in the army and be involved in the war, so he decided to join an international organization that arranged and supported (and still does) intercultural experiences called the American Field Service (AFS).[1] Thanks to this program, he was able to remain a civilian and drive an ambulance in Africa with the British Army. Then, in 1943, he was sent to Italy, and it was at that time that Weaver fell in love with the country and the culture (Covi, Rose and Weaver 1987: 85).

At the beginning of his stay he lived in Naples, where he met young Italians who were aspiring to become writers like him and were eager to expand their knowledge of foreign literature in general, and American literature in particular. At that time, in fact, Mussolini was the leader of the Italian Social Republic and was attempting to isolate Italian culture from foreign influences by imposing restrictions on the circulation of foreign texts in the form of censorship and banning. Mussolini believed that "the regime didn't want Italy to appear too receptive to foreign influences, since expressive receptivity would imply a failure on the part of the fascist revolution to create a culture of its own" (Rundle 1999: 428).

In particular, the works banned under Mussolini were those in which the King, or the Pope, or the Head of the Government or ministries or institutions of the country were insulted; and those that ridiculed public authorities and agents of public forces or armed forces (Ferrara 2004: 19). Works from the United States were banned. For example Ernest Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) was pronounced anti-Italian and banned because it evoked Italy's defeat at Caporetto during the First World War (Dunnett 2002: 101). Among works of Italian literature, all those supporting the United States were banned. An example was the Italian writer and novelist Elio Vittorini, best known for his anti-fascist sentiments, which were reflected also in his writings. *Americana* (1968), Elio Vittorini's anthology on American writers from the beginning of the 19th century until the 1930s, was banned twice because the regime did not wish "to perform acts of courtesy towards America" (Rundle 2000: 79). At that time Weaver's Italian was so poor that his Italian friends would give him Italian books to help him learn the language. Since the only way for him to

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[1] Anon. "AFS Foundation," American Field Service. 24 May 2013. <http://www.afs.org/afs-history-and-archives/afs-foundation/>

understand the texts was to translate them, he started doing it for himself and then publishing the translations. Weaver's intent was to earn some money and eventually become a famous writer (Guarnieri 1996: 129).

After the end of the war Weaver went back to the United States and continued his studies. During his senior year at Princeton he published one of his short stories in *Harper's Bazaar*. This publication could have meant the beginning of his fame, but he decided to earn some money, teaching for one year at the University of Virginia after graduation, and then go back to Italy still with the idea of becoming a writer. In 1949 he went to Rome on a Fulbright fellowship, the first for Italy. Weaver wanted to study Italian literature but, as he said in the article entitled "Italy and I," "my project was vague […] and to tell the strict truth, my interest in studying was vague too. Mostly I just wanted to go to Italy and learn" (Weaver 1953: 25). He obtained his postgraduate degree in literature at the University of Rome. At this point he was able to communicate fairly well in Italian, but he was not yet proficient. He decided to go and get a grammar book to teach himself Italian, to the great displeasure of his friends because he kept asking them to correct him and explain their corrections. Among his friends was Giuseppe Patroni Griffi, who was working at the time for a radio station; he later became a playwright and a theatre director. Another one was Francesco Rosi, who became an acclaimed film director.

Thanks to them and other friends who were in the Academy of Dramatics, Weaver was able to go to the theatre almost every night, and in this way he became acquainted with some of the major cultural figures of that time: Elsa Morante, Alberto Moravia and Luchino Visconti among others. In 1951 William Weaver translated his first book entitled *Un giorno di impazienza* (*A Day of Impatience*), written by his friend Raffaele La Capria. Weaver affirms he never went back to his translation because then he would start criticizing his own work. At that time, he thought translation was just like "changing money: you put lira in here and get back so many dollars" (Covi, Rose and Weaver 1987: 85). Basically, Weaver did not consider translation to be a complex process, but rather a mechanical one. However, gradually, as he came to work on other books, he began to understand that translation was much more than that. In line with Spivak (2000: 398) and Paz (1992: 159), Weaver begins to view translation as an intense form of reading, and an act of such intimacy that he says "I *am* a translation" and "I can't talk about translating without talking about myself" (Covi, Rose and Weaver 1987: 84). In other words, translation merges with the identity of the translator himself to the point that it is impossible to distinguish the person from the activity.

2.2 The translator

Weaver is what Pym calls "multiprofessional" (1998: 163). Weaver observed that translators are not given full credit for what they do, and as a consequence they are underpaid. He affirmed that "two underpaid professions make one normal income" (Covi, Rose and Weaver 1987: 86); for this reason he always tried to have other professions. He was a music critic, a writer, a professor, and a translator. As a music critic specializing in 19th century opera he published several books on Verdi and Puccini, and a biography of Eleonora Duse (Venuti 1982: 16). He also wrote regularly about music in American, English, and Italian publications. In addition, he translated Italian and French opera libretti, and worked as a critic and commentator on the Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts. As a writer, since he lived in Italy for a very long period of his life, he published articles included in the monthly magazine *Attenzione*, and more specifically in the section called "Letter from Italy," where he presented comments on the changes that Italian culture was undergoing in that specific moment (*ibid.*).

Also, Weaver was a permanent faculty member of Bard College in New York since 1991, teaching courses in literary translation and comparative studies that involved the interrelation of music, literature, and the fine arts. Weaver's idea is that you cannot teach a person how to translate because, like writing, "translating is really a creative form of writing" (King 1984: 6). But you can teach someone how to read. And also, you can teach someone how to solve translation problems.

Lastly, as a translator, Weaver worked on around 80 fiction and non-fiction Italian books. He always worked with living authors (apart from Pirandello) because he believed that cooperation with authors was the most stimulating part of being a translator, as he revealed in an interview (Venuti 1982: 21), but at the same time the most difficult one because authors tend to protect their works and do not want to let them go. Weaver always believed that if something does not work in English, it is either because the translator has not comprehended all the implications of the Italian or because the Italian is not clear. In both cases Weaver would face the situation by contacting the author to have a better understanding of the problem. Sometimes the author would make changes in the text, as Calvino sometimes did, to make it more comprehensible (Guarnieri 1996: 129). Weaver thus played an active role in the creation and re-creation processes and is not an example of the "invisible translator," to use Venuti's expression (1995: 1).

Weaver introduced into English most of the major 20th century Italian writers, among them Giorgio Bassani, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Oriana Fallaci, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Primo Levi, Eugenio Montale, Elsa Morante, Alberto Moravia, and collaborated with all the

authors he translated, albeit to varying degrees. His closest relationship was with Calvino. He was the only author who would read the translation before the submission to the publishing house, and they would constantly discuss problems of English. Sometimes Weaver would propose to Calvino several different alternatives for a single sentence and Calvino would pick the one he liked the best. Weaver did not necessarily agree with him and did not necessarily opt for Calvino's suggestion, but this constituted a way for both of them to discuss different aspects of translation (Venuti 1982: 21). In contrast, Giorgio Bassani would read the final version of the translation only after it was published. He would sit down and go over the whole translation, calling Weaver to ask for explanations any time he did not understand the choices adopted (*ibid*.: 22).

Weaver argued that, even though some of the authors he translated share common characteristics (for instance Eco and Calvino use a great deal of wordplay and culture specific jokes in their writings), every work is unique and there is not a pre-established way to translate. Indeed, it is difficult to find a pattern in the authors Weaver worked on because they were published over a fifty-year span, a period in which (above all after Mussolini's death) Italian literature experienced different trends and movements within post-modernism, from surrealism to deconstruction and post-structuralism; and because of the different writing styles and themes of these authors. For example, Calvino uses technical and scientific terminology (Covi, Rose and Weaver 1987: 90); Eco uses religious and medieval terminology, as well as philosophical terms (*ibid*.); Elsa Morante has a style that is permeated by cultural references to Italian events and life style; and Gadda's novels include a great deal of dialect (Venuti 1982: 18).

2.3 Reception of translations

Weaver's work has been extremely well received, yet paradoxically ignored at the same time. He received several awards for his translations, among which the PEN translation Prize, the PEN medal for translation, the John Florio Prize, and the National Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters prizes; however, most of the book reviews do not even mention his name or discuss his translations, as such. This finding confirms Reiss and Errol's statement (2000: 2) that reviews usually present general comments such as "translated fluently," "reads like the original," "excellent translation," and so on, while the work tends to be examined in terms of content, style and esthetic character. Interestingly, this lack of attention to the work of the translator is something that Weaver applauded. He argued that when a reviewer neglects to

mention the translator at all, the translator should take this omission as a compliment because it means that the reviewer simply wasn't aware that the book had been originally written in another language. For a translator, therefore, this kind of anonymity should be considered a real achievement (Venuti 1982: 26). Weaver's acceptance of the lack of attention paid to translation as an act of writing is perhaps not surprising in light of his background, which did not prepare him to be self-reflective about translation nor to examine the work of other translators.

TIME Magazine published an article in 1984 dedicated to major translators and their works, and Weaver was included (Blake 1984: 118). He was defined as the "preeminent interpreter of Italian prose" but not much more information was given. Eco (*ibid*.) also talked about him in an interview, saying that his English translations by Weaver are "faithful" without being "literal" because, while changing the denotations of the original, Weaver was able to preserve the connotations. The English text is different from the Italian but "in spite of this, the English text says exactly what I wanted to say" (Eco and McEwen 2001: 8). Eco goes on to develop his thesis that the heart of translation is interpretation, affirming that translating is "not only connected with linguistic competence, but with intertextual, psychological, and narrative competence" (*ibid*.). Similarly, Czech translation theorist Jiří Levý in his *The Art of Translation* claims that a translated work is a "compromise" (67) between the two interwoven layers of the translated work as a whole: the semantic content on the one hand, and the artistic features of the other (*ibid.*).

Eco's point of view is in line with Weaver's and Meschonnic's (2007: 127 *et seq*.), who believe that sometimes a less accurate translation is acceptable if the rhythm and effect of the source language are maintained. Eco recognizes the difficulty of the translator's task and shows his appreciation toward Weaver's work addressing him as a saint: "To Bill, the translator as saint" (Guarnieri 1996: 45).

2.5 The translating position

Weaver started to change his view of translation as an unproblematic linguistic transfer after having translated works by Carlo Emilio Gadda, whom he found one of the most difficult modern Italian writers, in part because of his use of puns and word play. Weaver claimed that he stopped writing bad translations at that point and that translating became a part of his life, a large part of his creative identity (Covi, Rose and Weaver 1987: 86). In one interview, in fact, when asked if he also did creative writing, Weaver answered "no," but he regretted that

answer for a long time because, as he admitted, he realized that "if you translate sincerely with all your heart, mind, and soul, you can't [...] do anything more creative" (*ibid*.: 91).

The main issue that Weaver attempted to solve when translating was the recreation in the target text of the writer's feelings and intentions, going beyond the words used. During an interview with Willard Spiegelman, Weaver affirms that in Italian some of the hardest things to translate are not the abstract and intellectual words that can be found in Eco's works but simple expressions, such as 'buon giorno'. This expression could be translated either as "good morning," or "good evening," or "good afternoon," or "hello," but in order to render the intentions of the author it is important to be aware of what the habits of a country are. For example, in order to translate correctly 'buon giorno' it is important to know at what time of the day and in what part of Italy the action takes place. In some areas of the country, in fact, people start using 'buona sera' from one in the afternoon, while in English "good evening" cannot be used if the action takes place at that same time of the day (Spiegelman 2002: n.p.).

Additionally, according to Weaver, it is important for the translator to know the writer of the original text and style, thoughts and interests in order to reproduce them. In fact, it is all this information that will help the translator in his activity, more than mere knowledge of translation theories. (Guarnieri 1996: 78).

2.5 The translation project

Among the several authors that William Weaver translated in the over 50 years of his career, one is Calvino, considered the most important Italian writer of the second half of the 20th century. Author John Updike described him as "genial as well as brilliant," able to "take fiction into new places where it had never been before, and back into the fabulous and ancient sources of narrative" (Weaver 1992: n.p.).

Weaver was not the first translator to work on Calvino's texts (Archibald was), but it is he who translated the greatest number. The first work by Italo Calvino that Weaver was asked to translate was *Cosmicomiche* (1965). The book had just been published when Calvino met Weaver in a bookstore in Rome and asked Weaver if he would be interested in translating it. The publishing house that had distributed the work in Italy was Einaudi, which specializes in history, art, philosophy and classics, but not much in fiction. However, thanks to Calvino, who started to work with Einaudi in 1950 as the editor for the literary series and

then as a consulting editor, he was able to publish his books and those of other young talents.[2] That was the beginning of a long-lasting relationship between the Italian writer and the American translator.

The most famous work that Weaver translated is, arguably, Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*), published in Italian in 1979 and in English in 1981.

3. Analysis of the translation

Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore is an experimental novel that takes inspiration from the French critics Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and their concept of the "death of the author," according to which the author's intentions and his/her personal background should not influence and limit the readers' interpretation of the text because the writer's understanding of his/her own text is not more valid or important than the readers' (Barthes 1977: 143). In Calvino's novel, the "death of the author" is represented abolishing the difference between the author and the reader.

Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore is about an unknown reader (the Reader) who, after purchasing the new Italo Calvino's novel, and almost finishing the first chapter, realizes that the book does not contain the whole novel and the pages start repeating because of an error in printing. The Reader decides to return the book to the store, where he meets the Other Reader (Ludmilla), who is experiencing the same problem. They trade their corrupted copies for uncorrupted ones and start reading the new books together. However, this second book is incomplete too. Curious to read the conclusion of the book, they run into a third book, completely different from the previous ones. Their research continues and brings them to discover different books, all incomplete. *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* ends with the Reader who is not able to complete the reading. This novel is a great example of metafiction, in which the act of telling is the main object of the novel, creating in this way a novel in the novel.

The approach Weaver claimed he adopted in translating this book was to keep the target text as close as possible to the original text. He claimed he translated segments of text without accuracy in order to keep the effect desired by the Italian author, or using Weaver's words "it wasn't so much conveying the exact meaning as it was creating this tone and atmosphere" (Covi, Rose and Weaver 1987: 89). In fact, following Meschonnic's argument

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[2] Calvino started to work with Einaudi upon graduating.

that the rhythm of words is extremely important, Weaver's purpose was "to create a book which can be read with the same degree of difficulty as the original" (Guarnieri 1996: 129). However, as Eugene Nida argues, "no two languages are identical" (1964: 156), therefore in many cases the translator found a compromise between rhythm and meaning, and adopted different strategies to translate the source text. One of the strategies Weaver adopted was normalization, which has the main purpose to meet the norm expectations of the target language.

Beyond rhythm, Weaver had great challenges in the translation of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore,* among them gender references, sentence structure and culture-specific words. Gender is an important grammatical category and requires the agreement between nouns and pronouns, and adjectives. As the scholar of classical languages Leonard R. Palmer (1988: 45) explains, gender seems superfluous in languages like English, where there are no distinct words to express the gender of adjectives, articles, determiners and pronouns (even though the gender of a noun is still important when cataphora and anaphora are used to replace a noun that has already been used or is going to be used later on). In Italian, on the contrary, every noun, whether animate or inanimate, has a gender. For example, the word "child" in English is neutral, therefore adjectives that refer to it will have only one form. However, in Italian there are two distinct words to translate child: *bambino* and *bambina*, and therefore there are four distinct adjectives: singular masculine, singular feminine, plural masculine and plural feminine (Guarnieri 2007: 600).

This peculiarity causes some problems for translators from Italian into English because they need to render a linguistic difference that is not always available in the target language. In the novel being examined in this paper, for example, Calvino presents "lettore" (male reader) and "lettrice" (female reader) as the main protagonists. Weaver had to think hard about how to translate them, and then he opted for "Reader" and "Other Reader", where "Other Reader" was used to refer to a woman (Guarnieri 1996: 155). Guarnieri sees in this choice a negative connotation (2007: 600), but she also believes that Calvino must have agreed to the choice, given the fact that he was known to be a misogynist and he used to collaborate with Weaver on the translations.

Punctuation was another challenge for Weaver not only in this work, but also in other works he translated, since it is used differently in English and Italian. Calvino, in particular, makes use of "terribly long" sentences (King 1984: 8), and since they would not work in English, there is no other option than breaking them up. However, "you have to know *how* to break it up," Weaver affirms in an interview with Martha King (1984: 8). Here follows an

example of how Weaver decided to translate a very long sentence from the source language into English:

ST (page 16)	TT (page14)
Perciò continuo a ingozzare di gettoni il telefono pubblico che me li risputa ogni volta: molti gettoni, come per una chiamata a lunga distanza: chissà dove si trovano, ora, quelli da cui devo ricevere istruzioni, diciamo pure prendere ordini, è chiaro che dipendo da altri, non ho l'aria di uno che viaggia per una sua faccenda privata o che conduce degli affari in proprio: mi di direbbe piuttosto un esecutore, una pedina in una partita molto complicate, una piccola rotella d'un grosso ingranaggio, tanto piccola che non dovrebbe neppure vedersi: difatti era stabilito che passassi di qui senza lasciare trace: e invece ogni minute che passo qui lascio tracce: lascio tracce se non parlo con nessuno in quanto mi qualifico come uno che non vuole aprir bocca: lascio trace se parlo in quanto ogni parola detta è una parola che resta e può tornare a saltar fuori in seguito, con le virgolette o senza le virgolette.	*And so I continue to cram tokens into the public telephone, which spits them back at me every time. Many tokens, as if for a long-distance call: God knows where they are now, the people from whom I am to receive instructions or, rather – let's come right out and say it – take orders. It is obvious that I am a subordinate, I do not seem the sort of man who is traveling for personal reasons or who is in business for himself: you would say, on the contrary, that I am doing a job, a pawn in a very complicated game, a little cog in a huge gear, so little that it should not even be seen: in fact, it was established that I would go through here without leaving any traces; and instead, every minute I spend here I am leaving more traces. I leave traces if I do not speak with anyone, since I stick out as a man who won't open his mouth; I leave traces if I speak with someone because every word spoken is a word that remains and can crop up again later, with quotation marks or without.*

From the example above one can see the strategy Weaver decided to adopt when dealing with punctuation. Weaver opted for a more rigid use of punctuation, in consequence of his very rigid education and his study of Latin (Guarnieri 1996: 85). Weaver domesticated Calvino's writing style, using different punctuation marks from the source text. While Calvino makes use of a large number of colons to keep the sentence incomplete until we encounter the period, Weaver, adopts largely semicolons. Semicolons are halfway between a period and a colon. They are generally used whenever two closely-related thoughts or clauses can stand on their own. This different way of breaking up sentences in Italian (by Calvino) and in English (by Weaver) is confirmed by Weaver himself in an interview with Martha King, during which Weaver argued that "You have to give the impression of its being a long sentence, a long, flowing period, while punctuating and breaking it up in such a way that the English-language reader can follow it and understand it and enjoy it" (King 1984: 9).

The last great challenge Weaver had to face when translating *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* refers to culture-specific words, such as *gettoni*, *macchine espresso*, and *bar*, just to mention a few examples. Weaver translated them with telephone tokens, espresso machines and café, respectively. Being aware that the English and the Italian words are not perfectly equivalent, Weaver's strategy was to use cultural equivalents and give the readership a sense of the connotations those words possessed, rather than leaving them in the SL as borrowings.

4. Conclusion

William Weaver played an extremely important role in the diffusion of Italian culture and literature of the second half of the 20th century in the United States translating more than 80 novels from Italian. His maturity as a professional led him to identify himself as a translator, and his inability to talk about translation without talking about himself.

Weaver's life, his love for Italy, the Italian people and culture, the experiences he lived and all the people he met, along with the other passions he had for opera and writing, shaped him in such a way that his sensitivity for the Italian language became extremely deep and made him understand that being a translator means more than simply transferring a text into a different linguistic system from the one adopted in the original text. Translating means going beyond words and transferring the author's feelings. Sometimes the same effect of the source text can be easily gained with a simple substitution of words, but some time a creative approach is required on the translator's part in order to produce a text that possesses the same degree of difficulty as the original. As included in the New York Times obituary (Weaver died on November 12th 2013), Weaver was able to become "a pre-eminent translator" of the Italian literature into English after World War II. This was achieved thanks to his deep understanding of translation and of some of the challenges the translation activity presents (Weber).

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