

An Open Letter to:

The president of the Italian Republic, *Giorgio Napolitano*

The heritage and cultural affairs minister, *Lorenzo Ornaghi*

The economic development minister, *Corrado Passera*

The undersecretary of state, with responsibility for the media, communications and publishing, *Paolo Peluffo*

The European commissioner for education, culture, multilingualism and youth, *Androulla Vassiliou*

The European commissioner for industry and entrepreneurship, *Antonio Tajani*

There are worse crimes than burning books.

One of them is not reading them.

Joseph Brodsky

Support for translation and translators...

so readers can continue to read and publishers continue to publish.

“Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested”, wrote Francis Bacon. The few that deserve to be chewed are becoming increasingly hard to find in a market that, as the Italian Publishers Association points out in its annual report, is under a dark shadow, and, for the first time in recent decades, in line with the negative trend in consumption.

Above all, there has been a fall in the number of translations. If in 1997 they amounted to almost twenty-five per cent of all published titles, now they are less than twenty. And if in 1997, 40.3 per cent of printed and distributed books were by foreign authors, the figure today is 35.8 per cent.

What’s more, though Italy is a country in which, despite everything, translations continue to be produced, there is a growing shift towards more accessible reading matter, at the expense of quality texts that often, though not always, appeal to a narrower readership. The first consequence is an obvious cultural impoverishment. Translating is all about getting to know, engaging with, exchanging and circulating ideas and styles of life. Nothing helps like a translation to communicate differences and similarities – thereby making them available to all – and to stimulate the cultural and civil growth of peoples.

But translation costs money. It impinges significantly on the price of a book, and has now become the first cost item to cut. In this context, Italian translators who work for the publishing world, already amongst the lowest paid in Europe, are seeing a drastic deterioration in their

financial position. Jobs are increasingly being given to people without the necessary skills and experience, once again at the expense of quality, in a downhill slide in knowledge that urgently needs to be halted.

In order to propose quality works from around the world in translations of equal value – easing the translation costs for publishers wishing to back them – we propose that Italy should follow the example of other European nations and set up a national fund to support translations into Italian and translators working for the publishing industry, thus enabling the circulation of books with a greater cultural weight.

We propose that this support should take different forms, starting with measures to supplement the fees offered by publishing houses, so as to encourage the publication of good-quality translations of less immediately accessible works. This would permit translators to be adequately rewarded for tackling complex texts that require particular skills and take longer to translate. At the same time publishers would be encouraged to bring out quality books that lie outside the rigid logic of the marketplace.

It is also necessary to invest in and support training: whether this is of novices, in a kind of *bottega* overseen by an experienced translator who passes on the skills of the trade; or of professionals, in the form of grants to help cover the costs of periods of work, study and research abroad, and of seminars and workshops to promote discussion and on-going professional development. There is also a need to consolidate and increase the number of Translators' Houses, ideal places for writers, translators and readers to meet and exchange ideas.

We are preparing a number of proposals along the lines of what is already in place in the rest of Europe, and we hope to be able to submit them shortly to whom they may concern.