Poetry in Translation: A Vessel to be Protected

Translating poetry, a vital system of communicating vessels

"... opening
simultaneous conflictual overloaded presences
a changeable pulse of mist, a
doubled poem, the verso of verso,
variable/ variabile,
a locus of difference"

Rachel Blau DuPlessis

Poetry, a commons. It spawns and links together different forms, meanings, levels. Levels that shift and converge to find points of equilibrium, coexistence, other tempos, reverberations. In its language, a body: the complexity of bodies. Signifieds and signifiers – sound, rhythm, syntax, vocabulary – freely interacting. Poetry, an antidote to manipulation: words not as tools, but as worlds to be discovered and inhabited. A place where the instability of language thickens, revealing structures, triggering sudden flashes and rifts.

Translating poetry multiplies poetry: living, fruitful terrains of knowledge, pleasure, debate and exchange. Tapping a plural reservoir of languages and themes from across the world, translators of poetry expand cultural horizons through a series of actions: they open their doors and ears, create other poetry, bring it about, splicing language to language to form a third body; they remind us that languages are not borders, but communicating vessels. And in the body of translation, the boundaries of words become fluid and porous. Untethered from a single meaning, they allow choral harmonies even when the sense may diverge. Translating poetry is a political, anthropological, social endeavour.

Translating poetry requires a keen ear, close study, surgical precision, days of fine-tuning even for a handful of lines, multiple tasks that may be simultaneous or differ in time frame, to arrive at balances in flux between the limits and possibilities of more than one language.

Translating poetry draws on specific skills necessary to an author: the skills involved in listening, dialogue and negotiation, which are much the same as those of non-violent coexistence and mutual responsibility, key components of democratic citizenship.

Translating poetry, the current state of affairs

The labour of translators has always been precarious and is now more precarious than ever. The remuneration is inadequate; one-off contracts with different parties allow no continuity; income must be pieced together, with no access to social insurance in Italy. Poetry translation is even less profitable: it is often done for free or for ridiculously low honoraria, with no contract at all. The lack of recognition for translators leads to exploitative practices, and sometimes to unethical behaviour by publishers.

The publishing system sees poetry as a marginal, "non-commercial" product that is in no way strategic. While it once attracted an elite community of hardcore readers (not numerous but voracious) who created a certain market, it is now the province only of readers too concerned with quality to be an appealing target group for a profit-focused industry. In this context, poetry in translation is mostly seen as a financial drain. And actually, the failure to invest in it does not seem limited to publishers.

It may be that the lack of interest in poetry translation stems first and foremost from the lack of any structural investment in support of literature in general; from the meagre funding that government institutions allocate to translation in Italy; and, at an even deeper level, the lack of vision and spaces of operation for pursuing broader, more holistic cultural goals. Meanwhile, the groups that promote the reading of poetry are still isolated, self-funded initiatives that struggle to survive.

Translating poetry, what is needed

A paradigm shift, with cultural policies and public funding to support those who write, translate, publish and read poetry.

National funding to support translation on a regular (at least annual) basis, modelled on what has been standard practice for some time in other European countries; the recognition of the translator's role as a second author, through specific, transparent grants, to encourage fair and appropriate contracts and remuneration.

Institutional action to acknowledge the fact that poetry translation is a strategic activity for the country's cultural and intercultural growth, and therefore cannot depend exclusively on market demand.

Targeted, recurring initiatives in established spaces of cultural outreach such as libraries, universities, schools, cultural institutes, foundations and research centres, community centres, bookshops, fairs, festivals and all other contexts that could make an important contribution to disseminating poetry.

In conclusion: concrete support aimed at the promotion, creation and upkeep of permanent places of action, thought and education that foster public awareness of the value of poetry – including poetry in translation – as a vital resource for an open, dynamic, democratic cultural life in any country.

These complementary actions fit into a broader framework of measures needed to improve working conditions for literary translators: for instance, collective bargaining, the application of royalties and the introduction of adequate social insurance, which are already at the centre of Strade's work.

This manifesto is the first step in a path that Strade per la Poesia intends to chart as a StradeLab working group; StradeLab is the cultural association connected to the literary translators' section (Strade) of SLC–CGIL, the communication workers' division of Italy's largest trade union. Over the past two years, we have presented a series of public events aimed at forging a network, discussing the status of poetry translators, finding ways to achieve greater recognition for their professional role, and identifying problems and potential solutions. To explore this theme, we have brought together a range of figures involved in the creation and dissemination of poetry, to foster an open-ended dialogue among the people who write, translate, publish, teach and read it.

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Il Manifesto
di Strade per la poesia

Poets, translators, teachers, publishers, librarians, festivals, journals, podcasters, readers and all other figures in the vast mosaic of the publishing world are welcome to sign this manifesto.
Below are the names of the initial signatories, in alphabetical order:

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