

# **Common and Uncommon Readers: Communication among Translators and Translation Critics at Different Moments of the Text's Life**

Emilia Di Martino & Monica Pavani

This paper explores the issues of translator voice, editorial intervention and translation criticism drawing on the authors' personal experiences with the same text in different fields of the translation territory. The analysis highlights the different needs of different readers. However, reading is *always* a personal experience, influenced by each reader's unique repertoire of previous readings.

Keywords: translator voice, creative translation, editorial intervention, translation criticism

Des questions découlant de la voix du traducteur, des interventions éditoriales et de la critique des traductions sont examinées à partir de l'expérience personnelle des auteures avec le même texte dans des champs différents. L'analyse souligne le fait que différents lecteurs ont des besoins différents. Toutefois, la lecture est *toujours* une expérience personnelle, influencée par le répertoire unique de lectures antérieures de chaque lecteur.

Mots clés : voix du traducteur, traduction créatrice, intervention éditoriale, critique des traductions

*"She switched the light on again  
and reached for her notebook and wrote:  
'You don't put your life into your books.  
You find it there.'"*

Alan Bennett: *The Uncommon Reader*<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction (Emilia Di Martino)**

Although both reading and translating are usually pictured as solitary activities, we all know that initially reading was actually done together with members of the family and friends. As books were too expensive to be owned in large quantities and read fast, literate people would read aloud to each other; so much so that Ambrose's solitary reading habits appeared so strange to Saint Augustine that he felt he should comment upon them in his *Confessions*.<sup>2</sup> Today's habit of listening to audiobooks at home or in the car may be slowly changing the way we approach and experience most types of reading<sup>3</sup> – in some countries more than in others – but the activity at large still remains de-socialized and solitary.

Contrary to what is commonly believed, translation seems to be going in the opposite direction: it is gradually becoming more of a social activity, even “a mere part of the assembly line”<sup>4</sup> in mass-fiction translation (or ‘factory’ translation). Also, network technologies are now opening up unprecedented opportunities for communication amongst the agents of the translation process.

We will focus here on less explored aspects of this multi-agent communication, first addressing the issue whether traces of editorial interventions survive in the translation, to be identified by alert readers, and then reflecting upon whether it would actually be fruitful, for the life of texts, that communication between translators and any such possible alert readers (who will better defined in the course of the paper) be encouraged during the pre-translation and while-translating stages. We will do so by drawing on our personal experience of approaching the same text from different (however intrinsically related)<sup>5</sup> perspectives, rooted as we are in different fields of the translation territory. Monica Pavani is a translator and I have dealt with her work in previous papers<sup>6</sup> attempting to follow Antoine Berman’s model of translation criticism,<sup>7</sup> which encourages scholars to approach the translated text receptively, despite the unavoidable negativity of the critical act, as put forward by Walter Benjamin.<sup>8</sup> Through the “analyse rigoureuse d’une traduction, de ses traits fondamentaux, du projet qui lui a donnée naissance, de l’horizon dans lequel elle a surgi, de la position du traducteur,”<sup>9</sup> I have sought to move “vers une pratique ouverte, et non plus solitaire, du traduire.”<sup>10</sup>

The starting point of our reflections, *The Uncommon Reader* by Alan Bennett, is, we feel, particularly appropriate for the purpose of this paper, as it deals with a peculiar and extremely powerful experience of reading. Late in her life, Queen Elizabeth ‘discovers’ the pleasure of books, and is tremendously transformed by this experience. Her solitary reading, encouraged by a peculiar (to say the least) ‘literary assistant’ who used to be a skivvy, has consequences not only on the people closely connected with her, but also on a larger social (and political) level.

## Story of the Translation (Monica Pavani)

I had been translating for many years – mainly from English but also from French into Italian – when in 2007 Adelphi proposed that I translate *The Uncommon Reader*. I immediately accepted the challenging task as I had previously translated another book for Adelphi and therefore was already familiar with their revision procedure. In fact, the translator's loneliness is just the first part of the process of translating, as the following stages – especially at Adelphi – consist of rewriting and revising, first after the main editor's corrections, and later on the basis of the observations of experts or special readers instructed to do this special task. As Adelphi is one of the most important Italian publishing houses, a translator working for them knows that the book he or she is translating will be read by a wide audience.

As well as being attracted by the idea of translating one of Bennett's latest works, I was also terribly frightened. I think that the translator's awe not only of the text, but also of the author and of the public, is an important element of which the translation critic is not necessarily aware. The translator's awe does, however, have its positive sides – first of all it encourages the translator's humility, which I personally consider a positive quality, as it spurs the translator to take into consideration a multitude of different points of view on the text.

Adelphi sent me the photocopied version of *The Uncommon Reader* that Bennett had published in the *London Review of Books*. There are a few small discrepancies with the version that later appeared in volume form, as Bennett himself had made some corrections to the original version. My first impression was that it would be difficult to render in Italian the very formal *and* ironical language with which Bennett wittingly has given life to the Queen. The circumlocutions in Bennett's English sound amusing but if I had tried to do the same in Italian everything would have become terribly tedious. In fact, as John Rutherford has underlined in his essay "Translating fun: *Don Quixote*," one of the difficulties about translating humour is that "although it is in one sense universal, being a part of nature in that all human societies laugh and smile, in another sense it is

not universal, being a part of nurture in that its immediate causes depend on value systems which are specific to individual cultures.”<sup>11</sup>

Bennett’s characters exist first of all as speaking figures, and much of the fun depends on the clash of registers that Bennett exploits. The first revision the Adelphi staff carried out on my initial version was intended to make the text and especially the dialogue sound more natural and I agreed with that, as Bennett – who is also and *mainly* a playwright – is particularly attentive to spoken language in his books. For instance, where the Queen informs her husband that she has discovered that they have a travelling library and he replies, ‘Jolly good. Wonders never cease,’<sup>12</sup> I had translated: “Ma benone. Le sorprese non finiscono mai.” The main editor altered it to: “Ma che bellezza” [That’s wonderful].<sup>13</sup>

When the time came for the last revision before publication, I was invited by Adelphi to ‘forget about the original version’ and think only about the Italian one so as to make all the jokes (most of which are based on puns and double meanings) as funny as possible in the target language. I think that the very peculiar effect of Bennett’s text is that it amuses *while* making one reflect and become conscious of the very many social and inner constraints hindering the Queen’s spontaneity. I therefore did my best to make my revised version reproduce this effect.

According to Rutherford, translators of books which are meant to be funny “would have to persuade readers that laughing and smiling are compatible with seriousness, that profound themes can be treated as effectively in comedy and in humour as in tragedy.”<sup>14</sup> Of course this is true for writers too but in translation it is often particularly difficult to keep the balance between these two effects, so dependent are they on social and cultural implications. Bennett’s text is nearly everywhere based on this emotional contrast, which is never openly exhibited but works throughout the text as a powerful undercurrent. This is why, in my opinion, all the research I had done to translate *The Uncommon Reader* in a fitting manner should remain invisible, especially as far as humour was concerned.

### **Approaching the Translated Text (Emilia Di Martino)**

It is well-known that translators rarely if ever select the titles of books, as there is too much of a marketing dimension to this choice. When I first read Monica's version of *The Uncommon Reader*, I was immediately intrigued by the 'disappearance' of the interdiscursive relationship with Virginia Woolf in the Italian title, *La sovrana lettrice* ('The Sovereign Reader'),<sup>15</sup> and was eager to see if I could detect more traces of editorial interventions in the text. The English title was to me an open reference to Woolf's *The Common Reader*. Bennett's queen, "uncorrupted by literary prejudices,"<sup>16</sup> moves from one book to the next following her instinct,<sup>17</sup> like Woolf's common reader who reads English literature free of the conditionings which often enslave literary critics I was also aware that Bennett often weaves interdiscursive relationships in the titles of his books.<sup>18</sup> I approached Monica's version of *The Uncommon Reader* as an 'alert' reader, used to looking at translated texts in a critical way, and as such I came to identify some 'problematic' areas in the text that Monica had handled using procedures and strategies which apparently move in different directions but, as I am about to argue, actually fit very well into the overall picture.

### **Approaching the Text (and the Title) to be Translated (Monica Pavani)**

As a translator, I feel I must have a double nature: even though I can be an 'alert' reader like Emilia, I also need to be – following Woolf's and Bennett's use of the term – a 'common' reader, as the translation of a book like *The Uncommon Reader* is meant not to be addressed only to scholars but to be enjoyed by any reader. The problem is that *The Uncommon Reader*, coherently with its title, is a very 'bookish' text. This means that in some cases I had to change the jokes slightly or cut a reference which would have been meaningless for the Italian reader. For example, in one instance when the books the Queen takes with her in her "transferences" are mentioned, the narrator points out that, when she got bored with *Tristram Shandy*, "Trollope (Anthony) was never far away."<sup>19</sup> Specifying the first name of the author in brackets is clearly an indirect and humorous reference to the British romantic novelist Joanna Trollope. Such a cryptic citation would have been lost on the

Italian reader. Therefore, in the Italian version, we left out “(Anthony)” and just kept the author’s surname.<sup>20</sup>

The title *The Uncommon Reader* is another example of a cultural reference whose ironical effect was impossible to maintain in Italian. The Italian title, *La sovrana lettrice*, was chosen by the editorial staff at Adelphi. After a first contact with Emilia, and upon considering her perplexities about the translated title, I carried out a limited survey and even among PhD students of English and American literature at the University of Ca’ Foscari in Venice Bennett’s title *The Uncommon Reader* did not immediately bring to mind *The Common Reader* by Virginia Woolf. This means that Italian ‘common readers’ would certainly have no idea of the hidden reference to Woolf’s collection of essays.

If it is true that the adjectives ‘common’/‘uncommon’ are very relevant in British culture, as they often indicate a difference in class or status, their translation usually sounds rather awkward in Italian, as ‘comune’ generally conveys just a disparaging connotation which does not necessarily characterize the adjective ‘common’ in English. Therefore, in my opinion, the apparently unfaithful translation ‘sovrana’ in Italian, with its double meaning of ‘queen’ and ‘sovereign,’ is actually the best solution for ‘uncommon,’ and I willingly accepted the editorial staff’s decision.

### **The Queen’s Use of Pronouns (Emilia Di Martino)**

One of the most delicate issues in the translation was the Queen’s language, her pronoun usage in particular. Bennett’s Queen makes use of (1) the ‘royal we’, or majestic plural, a marker of the speech of Shakespearian rulers, at present virtually obsolete but widely used in satire and caricature;<sup>21</sup> (2) the ‘royal one,’ which is similarly an object of caricature; and (3) ‘I’, which she seems to use for exchanges that are deemed to be more personal or as an attempt to decrease social distance. For example, Her Majesty switches from ‘one’ to ‘I’ in the following extracts from the English version, which are offered side by side with the Adelphi version, as they will later be commented upon by the translator:

Extract 1

<p>‘One has never seen you here before, Mr...’  ‘Hutchings, Your Majesty. Every Wednesday, ma’am.’  ‘Really? I never knew that. Have you come far?’  ‘Only from Westminster, ma’am.’  ‘And you are...?’  ‘Norman, ma’am. Seakins.’  ‘And where do you work?’  ‘In the kitchen, ma’am.’  ‘Oh. Do you have much time for reading?’  ‘Not really, ma’am.’  ‘I’m the same. Though now that <u>one</u> is here I suppose one ought to borrow a book.’</p> <p>[...]  ‘Is <u>one</u> allowed to borrow a book? <u>One</u> doesn’t have a ticket?’  ‘No problem,’ said Mr Hutchings.  ‘<u>One</u> is a pensioner’, said the Queen, not that she was sure that made any difference.<sup>22</sup></p>	<p>«Non l’abbiamo mai vista da queste parti, signor...».  «Hutchings, Maestà. Tutti i mercoledì, signora».  «Davvero? <u>Ne eravamo</u> all’oscuro. Viene da lontano?».  «Solo da Westminster, Maestà».  «E lei...?» domandò rivolta al ragazzo.  «Norman, Maestà. Seakins».  «E dove lavora?».  «Nelle cucine, Maestà».  «Oh. Lei ha molto tempo per leggere?».  «Non proprio, Maestà».  «Nemmeno noi, sa. Anche se adesso che <u>siamo</u> qui, immaginiamo sia il caso di prendere in prestito un libro».</p> <p>[...]  «<u>Occorre</u> una tessera per prendere libri in prestito?».  «Non c’è problema» disse il signor Hutchins.  «<u>Noi</u> siamo in pensione» dichiarò la regina, non sapendo bene se faceva la differenza.<sup>23</sup></p>
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## Extract 2

<p>‘How did you find it, ma’am,’ asked Mr Hutchings.  ‘Dame Ivy? A little dry. And everyone talks the same way, did you notice that?’  ‘To tell you the truth, ma’am, I never got through more than a few pages. How far did your Majesty get?’  ‘Oh, to the end. Once I start a book I finish it. That was the way <u>one</u> was brought up. Books, bread and butter, mashed potato - <u>one</u> finishes what’s on one’s plate. That’s always been my philosophy.’  ‘There was actually no need to have brought the book back, ma’am. We’re downsizing and all the books on that shelf are free.’  ‘You mean I can have it?’ She clutched the book to her. ‘I’m glad I came. Good afternoon, Mr Seakins. More Cecil Beaton?’<sup>24</sup></p>	<p>«Come l’ha trovata, Maestà?» chiese il signor Hutchings.  «Dama Ivy? Un po’ noiosa. E parlano tutti nello stesso modo, ci ha fatto caso?».  «A esser sincero, non ho mai superato le prime pagine. Lei dov’è arrivata, Maestà?».  «Oh, fino in fondo. Quando <u>cominciamo</u> un libro lo finiamo. <u>Ci hanno educate</u> così. Libri, purè, pane e burro: <u>bisogna</u> finire quello che c’è nel piatto. È la nostra filosofia da sempre».  «Non occorre restituire il libro, Maestà. Siamo in fase di ridimensionamento e tutti i libri su quello scaffale si possono prendere gratis».  «Intende dire che <u>possiamo</u> tenerlo?».  La regina si strinse il volume al petto. «<u>Abbiamo fatto</u> proprio bene a venire. Buongiorno, signor Seakins. Sempre Cecil Beaton?».<sup>25</sup></p>
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As appears in these extracts, Her Majesty’s interactions with her future literary aide Norman Seakins and the librarian of the City of Westminster travelling library are characterised by a

consistent use of impersonal constructions during their first chance meeting (Extract 1), and a sudden switch to first person singular on the occasion of the second meeting (Extract 2). In Italian we see a consistent use of first person plural in both extracts, accompanied by a few impersonal constructions.

In a third extract, from a conversation with Sir Kevin about a royal visit to Wales where the Queen's literary aide, Norman, is called to intervene, 'we,' which can be an extremely ambiguous linguistic marker often blurring the distinction between power and solidarity, seems to be used to imply complicity:

### Extract 3

<p>Sir Kevin heard a chair scrape as Norman got up.          'We're going to Wales in a few weeks' time.'          'Bad luck, ma'am.'          The Queen smiled back at the unsmiling Sir Kevin.          'Norman is so cheeky. Now <u>we</u>'ve read Dylan Thomas, haven't <u>we</u>, and some John Cowper Powys. And Jan Morris <u>we</u>'ve read. But who else is there?'          'You could try Kilvert, ma'am,' said Norman.          'Who's he?'          'A vicar, ma'am. Nineteenth century. Lived on the Welsh borders and wrote a diary. Fond of little girls.'          'Oh,' said the Queen, 'like Lewis Carroll.'          'Worse, ma'am.'          'Dear me. Can you get me the diaries?'          'I'll add them to <u>our</u> list, ma'am.'<sup>26</sup></p>	<p>Sir Kevin sentì raschiare una sedia mentre il cameriere si alzava.          «Fra qualche settimana <u>andiamo</u> nel Galles».          «Che scalogna, Maestà».          La Regina si voltò per sorridere a Sir Kevin che non sorrideva affatto.          «Norman è proprio sfacciato. Be', <u>abbiamo letto</u> Dylan Thomas, vero, e qualcosa di John Cowper Powys. E anche Jan Morris. Chi altro ci resta?».          «Potrebbe provare Kilvert, Maestà» disse Norman.          «Chi è?».          «Un vicario, Maestà. Dell'Ottocento. Viveva al confine con il Galles e ha scritto un diario. Gli piacevano le bambine.          «Oh,» disse la regina «come a Lewis Carroll».          «Peggio, Maestà».          «Cielo. Può procurarmi i diari?».          «Li aggiungo alla <u>nostra</u> lista, Maestà».<sup>27</sup></p>
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The first 'we' is clearly used as an equivalent of 'my husband and I,' while the subsequent mentions are all examples of an 'inclusive we' (for Norman's benefit) and at the same time an 'exclusive we' (to Sir Kevin's detriment). Reading is bringing the Queen closer to common people than to her usual entourage of ministers, and councillors.

In the following exchange (Extract 4), where the Queen finishes off a conversation with the Prime Minister, which she does not find particularly pleasant (and which was previously characterized by



an alternation of ‘one’ and ‘I’ on the Queen’s part), the pronoun ‘we’ appears to be employed in order to express the upper extreme of the formality spectrum (i.e. as ‘royal we’) and to underline both distance and disapproval:

Extract 4

<p>The Queen sighed and pressed the bell.  ‘<u>We</u> will think about it.’  The prime minister knew that the audience was over as Norman opened the door and waited. ‘So this’ thought the prime minister, ‘is the famous Norman.’  ‘Oh, Norman,’ said the Queen, ‘the prime minister doesn’t seem to have read Hardy. Perhaps you could find him one of <u>our</u> old paperbacks on his way out.’<sup>28</sup></p>	<p>La regina sospirò e suonò il campanello .  «<u>Ci penseremo</u>».  Il suo interlocutore capì che l’udienza era conclusa nel momento in cui Norman aprì la porta e rimase in attesa. «E questo» pensò il primo ministro «sarebbe il famoso Norman».  «Oh, Norman,» disse la regina «a quanto pare il primo ministro non ha letto Hardy. Le dispiacerebbe cercargli uno dei <u>nostri</u> vecchi tascabili?»<sup>29</sup></p>
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The Queen is cross because the Prime Minister will not agree to the idea of her sitting on a sofa and reading Hardy for her Christmas broadcast. By saying ‘we will think about it,’ she undoubtedly wants to stress her distance from the Prime Minister, while at the very same time teasing him with the possible hint of a special complicity existing between her and Norman: indeed, ‘one of our old paperbacks’ could also mean ‘yours and mine’. Translating the Queen’s Use of Pronouns (Monica Pavani)

Together with the staff at Adelphi – the main editor and a consistent number of proof-readers who each put forward suggestions – I tried out many versions alternating between ‘noi’ (first person plural) and ‘io’ (first person singular). Somehow the ‘io’ choice always seemed artificial and inadequate: the Italian Queen sounded neither as majestic nor as childish as she sounds in English. I felt that I had to make a different choice. My overall impression of Bennett’s Queen was a very positive one. Although she is ridiculed, it is evident that the author’s aim is to describe her gradual transformation into a true human being *through* reading. In the final part of the book, in fact, she gives a speech that turns out to be surprising for her audience both within the book and outside the

book. In the speech, the Queen's attitude and the language she uses are completely different than in the rest of the book: she is much more self-confident and not afraid of telling the truth about her duties as a ruler of her country. I later found confirmation of my interpretation when I listened to Bennett's radio recording of *The Uncommon Reader* and noticed the completely different tone of voice he uses in the final speech compared to the very high-pitched *falsetto* in the first part.

My choice was to consistently use the first person plural 'noi' in the first part where the Queen sounded much more depersonalized (as one can see in Extracts 1 and 2 above, where the underlined verbs are all conjugated in the first person plural, except for 'bisogna' and 'occorre' which are impersonal), and to start using the first person singular 'io' more often towards the end of the book so as to culminate in the final speech, where the Queen has finally become a true human being. In Extract 4, the shift from the 'noi' to the 'io' marks a progression towards the final part.

To bolster my decision, I watched Stephen Frears' *The Queen* – a film about the British monarchy which came out in cinemas around the world in 2006, the year Bennett's novel was published – in the dubbed version just to see how the Queen was made to speak in Italian, and I noticed that the 'noi' was prevalent. However, I also found that the Queen in the movie was very different from Bennett's Queen, and therefore there was no need to make her speak in the same way.

I believe that my final decision to translate the Queen's use of pronouns as a progression towards the first person, which does not exactly mirror the original, emerged from my umpteenth reading of *The Uncommon Reader* from a slight distance, allowing me to better penetrate the innermost aspects of the Queen, who is a much more complex character than she seems at first glance. I felt that my translation in its entirety should be endowed with a multitude of *voices*: this would make it coherent with the content (and context) of Bennett's novel. My choice was immediately approved by Adelphi.

### **Reflecting on the Queen's Use of Pronouns across Languages (Emilia Di Martino)**

With regard to this specific aspect of the translation, I feel that, in the movement across the two languages, the linguistic manifestation of how reading brings the Queen closer to common people is

lost. Indeed, Monica and the Adelphi team seem to use ‘noi’/verbal forms in the first person plural without exception when the Queen talks to her newly-made ‘friends of reading.’ Moreover, in the lines “‘You mean I can have it?’ She clutched the book to her. ‘I’m glad I came. Good afternoon, Mr. Seakins. More Cecil Beaton?’” (Extract 2), the use of ‘I’ seems to indicate the sudden realization of a person used to handling ‘public property,’ who becomes aware that the book can truly be hers, not as public, but as private and intimate: a very tender and childlike ‘I’ which again seems to clash with the Italian translation. Indeed, the Queen’s use of the high-sounding ‘noi’ in Italian, together with her clutching the book to her chest and stating she is glad she went to the mobile library, seem to emphasize her strong personality and her being used to the advantages of being a monarch. If anything, they seem to draw on the traditional description commonly found in the tabloid press of the royals as ‘scroungers’ all too willing to live off others. The narrator’s affection for the Queen which seems to surface in the source text is, in this case, altogether lost.

In one of her interviews that I had previously read,<sup>30</sup> Monica mentioned that she had watched Frears’ film to help her reflect on how to give a voice to Bennett’s Queen in Italian. Before we discussed the issue, this seemed to me to be evident in some passages, where the use of the first person plural clearly stands out (Extract 4). Yet, on a second reading, I realised that the use of the first person plural pronoun ‘noi’ is often just used at the start of dialogues. For instance, below in Extract 5, “potremmo” is the conjugation in the first person plural of the verb ‘potere’ in the conditional tense. The Queen then seems to impulsively shift to the first person singular pronoun ‘io’ (“potrei,” “Sto,” “Dovrei” are all conjugations in the first person singular of the verbs ‘potere,’ ‘stare,’ and ‘dovere’), as if her individuality was taking over.

#### Extract 5

<p>‘I thought this year <u>one</u> might do something different.’  ‘Different, ma’am?’  ‘Yes. If <u>one</u> were to be sitting on a sofa reading or, even more informally, be discovered by the camera curled up with a book, the camera could creep in – is that the</p>	<p>«Pensavo che quest’anno <u>potremmo</u> fare qualcosa di diverso».  «Di diverso, Maestà?».  «Sì. Per esempio <u>potrei</u> stare allo scrittorio a leggere o, in modo ancora più informale, seduta comodamente sul divano con un libro in mano; la telecamera potrebbe avvicinarsi</p>
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expression? – until I’m in mid-shot, when I could look up and say, “I’ve been reading this book about such and such,” and then go on from there.’

‘And what would the book be, ma’am?’ The prime minister looked unhappy.

‘That one would have to think about.’<sup>31</sup>

finché non sono in piano medio – è così che si dice? -, dopodiché potrei alzare gli occhi e dire: “Sto leggendo un libro che parla di questo e di quest’altro”. E proseguire da lì».

«E che libro sarebbe, Maestà?». Il primo ministro aveva l’aria afflitta.

«Dovrei pensarci».<sup>32</sup>

The translator’s choice seems to me to deprive the target text of the indications of distance/closeness that the Queen appears to convey to people around her in the source language text. Instead, it seems to focus on the Queen’s strong personality, probably to meet the expectations of a public who have come to develop a strong curiosity about the Royal Family’s private affairs due to the media coverage of such events as Squidgygate, Camillagate and Diana’s death, and already have a model for the Queen’s language (and therefore personality) in mind. Books are marketed like any other product and before my encounter with Monica I was convinced that the publisher had most probably attempted to build a network of connections for Bennett’s book to find a suitable place in the Italian reader’s culture. Monica has denied any such intervention in her case. However, translators’ choices are always, inevitably, the fruit of a compromise between their perceptions of the source text’s meaning/objectives and the influences of the cultural context in which they operate, and translators are, in my opinion, often unaware of the actual weight and implications of such influences, as well as of the fact that they have internalized a specific discourse on translation (the norms).

### **Translating Gay Language (Monica Pavani)**

Norman Seakins is a central figure in *The Uncommon Reader*. Thanks to his chance encounter with the Queen, the unattractive young man is lifted out of his humble role as kitchen hand and bestowed with the responsibility of recommending books to Her Majesty. The young man’s plainness is the object of mockery and in a particular dialogue between the equerry and the Queen’s private secretary he is described by the equerry as “(n)ot dolly enough,” after which the private secretary comments “Thin, ginger-haired. Have a heart.”<sup>33</sup>

I did not know the meaning of ‘dolly,’ so I asked an English friend of mine and was told that ‘dolly’ means ‘pretty or nice for a gay.’ Bennett’s book is not primarily concerned with the gay issue, therefore in my opinion words in the Italian text should not be so specific as to be understood only by the gay community. At first I had translated the expression by “Ma non è certo un figurino” [But he’s not certainly a fashion-plate], which was different, but to me sounded close to ‘dolly enough.’ The final choice of the main editor was “Non è abbastanza carino”<sup>34</sup> [He is not nice enough], which in fact loses its gay connotation, although within the dialogue, since the equerry says it “to the private secretary not to the Queen,” it is pretty clear that the equerry might be personally interested in Norman if only Norman were nicer.

### **Reflections on the Gay Issue (Emilia Di Martino)**

The word ‘dolly’ – which is not reminiscent of ‘pretty’ or ‘beautiful’ to an ordinary reader – has a strong gay connotation in this context. ‘Dolly’ is in fact short for ‘dolly bird,’ which the on-line Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as a British expression used to refer to a pretty young woman. The on-line Gay Slang Dictionary lists the expression ‘Dial-A-Dolly-Service’ as meaning (1) male prostitute that gets his business by phone; (2) a 900 phone sex line. In fact, in Polari, i.e. in British gay slang language, ‘dolly’ means ‘pretty, nice, pleasant.’ The equerry who uses the word may himself be gay, and as he uses the term when talking to the personal secretary, the latter may be implicitly included in the community as well. Indeed he is the one who seems to most clearly identify Norman as a ‘queen’ for the benefit of the common reader. When the special advisor asks him if Norman is a ‘nancy,’ we learn that “Sir Kevin didn’t know for certain but thought it was possible.”<sup>35</sup> As “non è abbastanza carino” leaves out the hint to sexual preference, it is probably only at this point in the text, as the word ‘checca’ is used for ‘nancy,’ that the Italian common reader, who has only a slender chance of spotting the allusions contained in Norman’s favourite reads, clearly understands the character’s sexual orientation.

In short, I feel there has been a slight process of normalization with respect to the translation, with a focus on the most subversive dimension of Bennett’s writing. The gay issue seemed to me quite

meaningful in the book, which followed shortly after Bennett's both delicate and crude coming out in *Written on the Body* (a diversity manifesto, in my opinion). Before discussing the matter with Monica I thought the normalization process may have been unconsciously carried out by the translator herself, but as the person responsible for the choice was actually the main editor, I now suspect this was an attempt to make a text, which may have otherwise sounded too crammed with gay references, more 'palatable' for the Italian reader. However, this causes other nuances to get lost in translation. While evidence of at least some Italians' homophobic attitudes towards sexual diversity can be found in recent press articles,<sup>36</sup> I feel it is worth stressing that the reference to Cecil Beaton in the source text may well be said to 'encapsulate' the fictitious character of Norman for the British reader. On the one hand, Cecil Beaton was known for his 'loving, caring' portraits of the Royals and especially of Queen Elizabeth II;<sup>37</sup> on the other, he was gay and the Queen Mother's friend.<sup>38</sup>

### ***My Dog Tulip* (Emilia Di Martino)**

On his first commission for Her Majesty, Norman Seakins picks *My Dog Tulip* as the Queen's next read. The 1956 novel by J.R. Ackerley tells the story of a man's relationship with his dog, the fictional counterpart of the writer's Alsatian bitch, Queenie. This is the only dog which is clearly identified in a book where dogs are crucial as they represent the physical trigger in initiating the Queen's new course of life. Had it not been for her corgis, Her Majesty would never have visited the mobile library, met Norman or developed a love for reading. Moreover, *My Dog Tulip* marks the Queen's first encounter with sexual diversity in the book and, due to the Woolf reference in Bennett's title, Queenie brings to mind (at least it brought to *my* mind) Woolf's dog Pinka and her fictional double Flush.<sup>39</sup>

An Alsatian, that is, a big, aggressive dog that one tends to identify as a male dog, Ackerley's dog is not only a female, but is called Queenie (a name that has quite a strong gay connotation), although the name was changed to Tulip in the book because the publisher thought Queenie would encourage jokes about Ackerley's sexual orientation.<sup>40</sup>

Proper names have not usually been the object of translation over the last few years in Italian (and not only Italian) translated literature.<sup>41</sup> As a result, I found it extremely intriguing that Monica chose to translate this name (actually the only translated proper name in the book) as ‘Reginetta,’ all the more so because she translated the title of Ackerley’s book as *La mia cagna Tulip* (*My bitch Tulip*). The term ‘cagna’ stands out in the pages where it is used and sounds a rather odd choice to me in the overall text, considering that the dog’s sex is irrelevant in *The Uncommon Reader*.

### ***La mia cagna Tulip* (Monica Pavani)**

I actually did not decide to translate Ackerley’s book as *La mia cagna Tulip*. The decision was taken instead by the main editor at Adelphi. She had most probably read the book in English, as the Adelphi catalogue also includes the translation of another book by the same author, *My Father and Myself*.

In my first version I had translated the title with the male ‘cane’ and I had also translated Tulip into Italian because, considering how Bennett plays with titles, I thought that *Il mio cane Tulipano* was funny, but the Adelphi staff decided to leave the original ‘Tulip.’

Later on in the text, Norman tells the Queen that *My Dog Tulip* is supposed to be fiction but, as Ackerley himself did have a dog, in fact it is “disguised autobiography.” What Norman does not tell the Queen is that Ackerley called his dog Queenie. The translation of Queenie by ‘Reginetta’ was my choice, as the word kept the reference to ‘queen’ (in Italian ‘regina’). I also thought that a gay man might name his dog after a kind of beautiful but fake showgirl or a Miss World (in Italy Miss World contestants are often called ‘Reginette’ and they wear a crown). I therefore considered that Reginetta was an amusing name for the dog, and would be an appropriate translation.

### **Approaching the Translation of ‘Bitch’ (Emilia Di Martino)**

Monica’s reasons for choosing Reginetta as the dog’s name sound very convincing, but when I first reflected on the issue I was quite confused by the choice of translating a proper name, as I mentioned above. My confusion also stemmed from the fact that the translator had not opted for a name with specific sexual connotations (to me ‘Reginetta’ did not sound like a name a gay person

would give his dog). Leaving it as in the original would probably have sounded more suggestive of the gay world to me, if for no other reason than that it reminded me of the band Queen, whose vocalist Freddie Mercury was widely known to be gay and the fact that in gay-speak ‘queen’ is used to depict a rather flamboyant homosexual.

This encouraged me at the time to look at this part of the text as particularly meaningful. I pursued my research and found that *My Dog Tulip* had recently been translated into Italian by Giona Tuccini (although, as Monica later told me, the translation had not come out yet when she was working on the translation of *The Uncommon Reader*). Tuccini had left the proper name unchanged and opted for the more neutral option ‘cane,’ at least in the title. Although we know Tulip is actually a female dog (i.e. a bitch), the English title does not specifically characterize the dog as female. Yet Monica had used the feminine noun ‘cagna,’ which apparently seems to have the same negative connotation in Italian as the English equivalent ‘bitch,’ although recently, feminism has actually re-appropriated the term in English and extended it to connote a *strong female*. Such a shift does not seem to have occurred in Italian as yet, but traces of the word being used in a positive way, as a translation for the English term, can be found in feminist contexts.<sup>42</sup>

In light of this, I came to look at Monica’s use of ‘cagna’ in her translation of the title *My Dog Tulip* from a different perspective. While bringing a tinge of feminism to the text and probably being itself a sort of re-appropriation of the perceived derogatory use of the term – a bold choice indeed, maybe a potential though unwitting act of feminine dissidence? – Monica’s choice seemed to me to compensate for the loss in the book’s title, brilliantly placing *La sovrana lettrice* at the heart of a tightly woven, complex network of references (from Barrett and Woolf to contemporary feminist artists), some of which surely were not present in the source text. Indeed, although I am now aware that the feminist re-reading was actually a personal impression of mine and not the translator’s conscious choice, Monica’s ‘new’ intertextual marker still seems to me to function very effectively in the ‘architecture’ of the target text: a text less suggestive of the gay world than the original but with a compensatory tinge of feminist gender subversion.



## Conclusion (Emilia Di Martino)

*“Translation is a kind of transubstantiation; one poem becomes another.  
You can choose your philosophy of translation just as you choose how to live:  
the free adaptation that sacrifices detail to meaning,  
the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude.  
The poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life;  
both, like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible,  
what’s between the lines, the mysterious implications.”*

Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*

The quotation above is about the translation of poetry, and yet it applies to all types of translation: what is effectively described is in fact the movement characterising *any* journey across languages. Whereas the translation critic can intercede in the process to widen the net of cultural references, the translator, engaged in the journey from language to life, does not always have the same opportunity.

As it appears, Monica’s reading of Bennett’s text and my own reading were quite different. Monica had not noticed some of the things I had discovered in the text, which is entirely justifiable, considering the speed at which translators are required to work. The product of our different activities is the result of different needs and implies different readers. Whereas Monica had been asked to produce a text which could be enjoyed by *any* Italian reader independently of the source text, I had journeyed across texts initially for my own personal curiosity and then with the scholarly aim of assessing where the Pavani/Adelphi version stood in relation to the Bennett text through an analysis which obviously only included those aspects of the text that *I* had identified as ‘significant’.<sup>43</sup>

My objective entailed a different target reader than the one implicit in Monica’s work: not a mere bibliophile, carrying out his or her activity for the sake or pleasure of it, but a goal-oriented reader, i.e. a literature or translation student or scholar. Our different tasks may be redefined, stressing our diametrically opposed relationship with the text. While the translator strives to produce a text which is, however unwillingly, ‘final,’ the translation critic aims at ‘disclosing the storm’ before the

apparent ‘calm’ of such a ‘final’ text. Translation critics attempt to trace the reading, research and interpretation processes behind the ‘final’ product, together with the decision-making processes and the possible frustrations involved in producing it. The text that the translator had been forced to ‘close’ is re-opened by the translation critic, who thus also re-opens the dialogue between the source text and the target text providing new forays into the former and its underlying culture.

Berman is firmly convinced translation is “une forme sui generis de critique”<sup>44</sup> and he believes that it should move on and become “critique et commentaire d’elle-même.”<sup>45</sup> But is this actually feasible in light of the conditions translators work under?<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Berman also stresses that translation should be free, that is, not subordinated to any theoretical discourse. Nor should the translator and the translation critic have the same reading background, says Berman: the latter is bound to produce a conceptually rigorous work which, conversely, is not expected of the translator.<sup>47</sup>

The conversations Monica and I had after she heard about my interest in her work have both helped, and urged me, to probe further into both texts to gain a deeper insight and understanding of the translation process. Monica has experienced something similar, even though ‘reopening’ a translation a few years after its completion is not always easy, as many of the exchanges between the translator and the editorial staff are not recorded anywhere. Had these conversations preceded the release of the translation, our respective readers would probably have read more leveled, aseptic and conforming texts, devoid of the sparkle of inspiration and enthusiasm which characterises ‘personal’ texts. Reading is a personal experience and it is far more widely affected by each reader’s unique repertoire of previous readings than it is influenced by other people’s reading of the same books. I believe that, as in all fields, diversity in translation should be encouraged and stimulated rather than controlled and channeled. Respect for diversity contributes to safeguarding the wealth, uniqueness and value of the individual reading process and ensures the ongoing progress of the mind, the life of texts, the survival of literature, the wealth of culture and, ultimately, the enrichment of human kind.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> “But while reading, his eyes glanced over the pages, and his heart searched out the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. Ofttimes, when we had come (for no one was forbidden to enter, nor was it his custom that the arrival of those who came should be announced to him), we saw him thus reading to himself, and never otherwise; and, having long sat in silence (for who durst interrupt one so intent?), we were fain to depart, inferring that in the little time he secured for the recruiting of his mind, free from the clamour of other men’s business, he was unwilling to be taken off. And perchance he was fearful lest, if the author he studied should express aught vaguely, some doubtful and attentive hearer should ask him to expound it, or to discuss some of the more abstruse questions, as that, his time being thus occupied, he could not turn over as many volumes as he wished; although the preservation of his voice, which was very easily weakened, might be the truer reason for his reading to himself.” St. Augustine (Bishop of Hippo), *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. J. G. Pilkington (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1943), p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> Clearly, for certain genres such as children’s books, which are almost always read aloud, the reading experience has always been and will always be collective.

<sup>4</sup> John Milton, “The Translation of Classic Fiction for Mass Markets. The Case of a Brazilian Book Club, the Clube do Livro,” *The Translator*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2001), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> “There are translations which are supreme acts of critical exegesis, in which analytic understanding, historical imagination, linguistic expertness articulate a critical valuation which is at the same time a piece of totally lucid, responsible exposition.” George Steiner, *After Babel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1992), p. 429. As for the structural relationship between translation and criticism, see also Antoine Berman, “Critique, commentaire et traduction (Quelques réflexions à partir de Benjamin et de Blanchot),” *Po&sie*, no. 37 (1986), pp. 88-106; and Antoine Berman, *L’Épreuve de l’étranger. Culture et traduction dans l’Allemagne romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Emilia Di Martino, “La sovrana lettrice e *The Uncommon Reader*: un approccio critico al testo tradotto,” in *Tradurre in pratica. Riflessioni, esperienze, testimonianze*, eds. Flora De Giovanni and Bruna Di Sabato (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2010), pp. 113-140; Emilia Di Martino, “Da *The Uncommon Reader* a *La sovrana lettrice*: voci in transito,” in *Traduttrici. Female Voices across Languages*, ed. Oriana Palusci (Trento: Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche, 2011), pp. 289-300; Emilia Di Martino, “When the same book speaks two different languages: Monica Pavani and the ‘ferrying’ of the (Q/q)ueen’s voice across languages,” in *Variation and Varieties in Contexts of English*, eds. Giuseppe Balirano, Julia Bamford and Jocelyne Vincent. Special Issue of *AION Anglistica*, vol. 16, no. 1-2 (2012), pp. 57-83.

<sup>7</sup> “Avec Berman, la traduction est libérée de la chasse gardée des linguistes et des belles lettres. Elle se trouve au centre d’une nouvelle prise de conscience des relations culturelles en tant qu’activités fondatrices de l’identité collective. La traduction devient un symptôme, un révélateur de la citoyenneté culturelle.” Simon Sherry, “Antoine Berman ou l’absolu critique,” *TTR*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2001), p. 21. Godard also stresses “son importante contribution à l’élaboration de la ‘traductologie’ comme champ du savoir.” Barbara Godard, “L’Éthique du traduire: Antoine Berman et le ‘virage éthique’ en traduction,” *TTR*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2001), p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 1 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Antoine Berman, *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 13-14. Translated by Françoise Massardier-Kenney as “rigorous analysis of a translation, of its fundamental traits, of the project that gave birth to it, of the horizon from which it sprang, of the

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position of the translator” (*Toward a Translation Criticism: John Donne*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2009, p. 3).

<sup>10</sup> Antoine Berman, *L’Epreuve de l’étranger*, p. 19. Translated by Stefan Heyvaert as “toward an open, no longer solitary practice of translation” (*The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> John Rutherford, “Translating fun: *Don Quixote*,” in *The Translator as Writer*, eds. Susan Bassnett and Peter Bush. (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Bennett, *La sovrana lettrice* (Milano: Adelphi, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> John Rutherford, “Translating fun: *Don Quixote*,” p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> Fortuitously, the title of an 1887 historical piece of fiction by G.A. Henty about “The Life and Reign of Queen Victoria” (subtitle), re-issued by Robinson Books in 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Dr Johnson, *Life of Gray*, quoted in Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego New York: Harcourt, 1984 [1925]), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> For more ample reflection on the title, and all the other aspects of the book dealt with in this paper, see Emilia Di Martino, “La sovrana lettrice e *The Uncommon Reader*: un approccio critico al testo tradotto,” and Emilia Di Martino, “Da *The Uncommon Reader* a *La sovrana lettrice*: voci in transito.”

<sup>18</sup> For example, Alan Bennett’s *Written on the Body*, 2005, is a clear reference to Jeanette Winterson’s book of the same title.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader*, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Bennett, *La sovrana lettrice*, p. 63.

<sup>21</sup> Katie Wales, *Personal Pronouns in Present-Day English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader*, pp. 6-7. Our emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Bennett, *La sovrana lettrice*, pp. 11-12. Our emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader*, p. 11. Our emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Bennett, *La sovrana lettrice*, p.15. Our emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader*, p. 37. Our emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Bennett, *La sovrana lettrice*, pp. 34-35. Our emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader*, p. 58. Our emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Bennett, *La sovrana lettrice*, p. 49. Our emphasis.

<sup>30</sup> Luca Balduzzi, “Intervista via e-mail a Monica Pavani”, 4 November 2007, <<http://www.imolaoggi.it/civetta/index.cfm?wnews=105>>. Website consulted June 30, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader*, p. 56. Our emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Alan Bennett, *La sovrana lettrice*, p. 48. Our emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader*, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> Alan Bennett, *La sovrana lettrice*, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader*, p. 65.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Marco Pasqua’s “Attacco al videogioco con le famiglie gay ‘Minaccia l’educazione dei bambini,’” *La Repubblica* (May 14, 2011), which states that a number of Italian politicians had recently vehemently criticized the videogame *The Sims* due to its featuring gay families among its characters.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Brown, “Unseen Cecil Beaton pictures of Queen to go on show at V&A.” *The Guardian* (June 9, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Alex Needham, “Cecil Beaton: photographer to the young Queen Elizabeth II.” *The Guardian* (February 6, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Woolf wrote a novel about Elisabeth Barrett’s special relationship with her golden cocker spaniel, Flush.

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<sup>40</sup> Dylan Skolnick, "My Dog Tulip." *Pulse - Long Island Magazine* (August 31, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Emilia Di Martino, "Tradurre i nomi propri," in Emilia Di Martino and Bruna Di Sabato, *Testi in viaggio. Incontri fra lingue e culture attraversamenti di generi e di senso traduzione* (Torino: UTET, 2011), pp. 147-156; Theo Hermans, "On Translating Proper Names, with Reference to De Witte and Max Havelaar," in *Modern Dutch Studies. A volume of essays in honour of Professor Peter King*, ed. Michael Wintle (London: Athlone Press, 1988) pp.11-24; Christiane Nord, "Proper Names in Translations for Children: Alice in Wonderland as a Case in Point," *Meta*, vol. 48, no. 1-2, 2003: pp. 182-196.

<sup>42</sup> For example, Anne Sexton's fictional persona Ms Dog was translated as 'Madonna Cagna' by the Florentine translator Rosaria Lo Russo in *Poesie su Dio*, published in 2003.

<sup>43</sup> As already hinted at above, the aim was that of producing a piece of translation criticism such as that which is recommended in a cultural context where translated works are still looked at and treated as if they had originally been written in the target language. See Berman, *Pour une critique des traductions*; Juliane House, *Translation Quality Assessment. A Model Revisited* (Tübingen: Narr, 1997); Emilio Mattioli, "Per una critica della traduzione," *Studi di estetica*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1996); Katharina Reiß, *Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Übersetzungskritik: Kategorien und Kriterien für eine sachgerechte Beurteilung von Übersetzungen* (Munich: Hueber, 1971. Translated into English by [Erroll. F. Rhodes](#) as *Translation Criticism: The Potentials and Limitations. Categories and Criteria for Translation Quality Assessment*. Manchester: St. Jerome, 2000). There are as yet virtually no attempts at translation criticism in Italy with the exception of Mattioli's encouragement to establish "una critica della traduzione" (Mattioli, "Per una critica della traduzione") and Nadiani's invitation to move on, towards a form of hypermedial literary translation criticism, which he refers to as "traslazione" (Giovanni Nadiani, "La critica della traduzione letteraria nell'epoca della letteratura digitale. Alcuni spunti a partire dal "metodo Berman"," *inTRAlinea*, vol. 3, 2000, <<http://www.intralea.org/archive/article/1629>>, website consulted October 15, 2011. We have reviews rather than pieces of criticism, and they are focused on assessing the quality of translation (when they actually touch upon the translation aspects at all) to recommend new books/translations to readers. Little attention is paid to trying to understand the journey that a specific target text underwent across languages/cultures and the possible reasons behind the differences between original and translated text.

<sup>44</sup> Berman, *L'Épreuve de l'étranger*, p. 20. Translated by Stefan Heyvaert as "a *sui generis* form of criticism" (*The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> Antoine Berman, "Critique, commentaire et traduction," p. 106, translated by Luise von Flotow as "criticism and commentary of itself," in *Translation Studies. Critical Concepts in Linguistics*, vol. 1, ed. Mona Baker (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 110.

<sup>46</sup> I have dealt with this elsewhere: Emilia Di Martino, "La revisione," in Emilia Di Martino and Bruna Di Sabato, *Testi in viaggio*, pp. 168-175; Emilia Di Martino, "Il mercato editoriale," in Emilia Di Martino, Bruna Di Sabato, Patrizia Mazzotta, and Ruggiero Pergola, *Apprendere a tradurre. Tradurre per apprendere. La traduzione come obiettivo e strumento di apprendimento in ambito microlinguistico* (Lecce: Pensa Multimedia, 2012), pp. 240-243.

<sup>47</sup> Antoine Berman, *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne*, pp. 38-43.

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