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REWRITING LITERARY HISTORY BY INCLUDING TRANSLATIONS: THE RESEARCH PROJECT *LTIT – LETTERATURA TRADOTTA IN ITALIA*

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Abstract – Translated literature can be considered the primary connection between domestic and world literature. The research project LTit – Letteratura tradotta in Italia *investigates translations as an integral part of Italian literature, challenging methodological nationalism and adopting a transnational perspective. It draws its methodological framework from diverse scholarly traditions, represented here by David Damrosch, Itamar Even-Zohar, Pierre Bourdieu, Antoine Berman, and Gianfranco Folena. The research group has produced a database* (www.ltit.it), *numerous studies on key gatekeepers* (traiettorie), *a book series* (Letteratura tradotta in Italia), *a scientific journal* (ri.tra: rivista di traduzione), *and has contributed to establishing and strengthening institutions that promote the study of this interdisciplinary field. The project's ultimate goal is to rewrite Italian literary history by systematically including translations.*

Keywords: Translations, Literary history, Italian Literature, World Literature, Research Projects

1. Between Domestic and World Literature

Wherever we enter a bookstore worldwide, we typically find works from all literatures shelved together. The books—from Homer's *Iliad* to Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*—are usually all in the same language. In Italy, they are in Italian. Despite disciplinary divisions within academia, our perception of world literature remains unified. This unity stems from a fundamental reality: except in rare cases, we do not read Dostoevsky or Cao Xueqin in their original languages; rather, we encounter transla-

tions—that is rewritings of the original texts produced by domestic translators, published by domestic publishers, prefaced by domestic writers, or edited by domestic scholars.

In Italy, for instance, we believe we are reading Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, but we are actually reading *Il giovane Holden*, an Italian rewriting by translator Adriana Motti. Similarly, we think we are reading an 11th-century Japanese novel by Murasaki Shikibu, but we are in fact reading *Genji, il principe splendente*—an Italian rewriting, coincidentally also by Adriana Motti, based on Arthur Waley's celebrated English version, *The Tale of Genji*, first published in the 1920s.

The very fact that translations—the texts primarily defining our image of world literature—are domestic cultural products forms the foundation of the *LTit — Letteratura tradotta in Italia* [Translated Literature in Italy] research project, launched in 2013, which I lead as Principal Investigator.

Central to our work is reconceptualizing world literature not as a global unitary repertoire (as Harold Bloom still maintained in *The Western Canon*, 1994), but as a galaxy of interconnected repertoires, each produced by a local culture—an idea recently advanced among others by Pascale Casanova, but already implicit in Goethe's original notion of *Weltliteratur* (Bloom 1994; Casanova 1999)[1]. In essence, world literature is not singular but plural: one iteration emerges through translations in the Anglosphere; another, distinctively shaped, in China; yet another in Italy; and so on. Thus, in every culture, we do not have separate domestic and foreign literatures, but a single literature in which Kālidāsa, Dante, Omar Khayyam, and Roberto Bolaño coexist—within the same language and the same production system. Within this framework, we began systematically rethinking Italian literary history by including translations.

Some translations are already acknowledged—Vincenzo Monti's *Iliade* (not Homer's!), Cesare Pavese's *Moby Dick* (not Melville's!), and Salvatore Quasimodo's *Lirici greci* appear in most textbooks. However, translations meriting recognition as masterpieces or that have shaped pivotal turning points in Italian culture are far more numerous. The full corpus of Italian literary translations remains enormous and largely unexamined, opening vast research possibilities.

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[1] For Goethe's thought on translations, see Berman 1984.

Given its ambitions, the project was interdisciplinary and collaborative from the outset. The initial research group—funded by a FIRB/Futuro in Ricerca grant from the Ministry of Education, University and Research—included, alongside myself, Anna Baldini (Italian Studies), Daria Biagi and Irene Fantappiè (Comparative Literature), and Stefania De Lucia and Anna Antonello (German Studies). Over time, it expanded to fourteen scholars from diverse disciplines and broadened its scope[2].

2. The Method and the Object

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the project, our reflection was nourished by diverse contributions, ranging from comparative literature to translation studies, linguistics, history, Italian studies, and, above all, sociology. For the sake of brevity, I will illustrate the extensive theoretical groundwork that led us to construct our method and, consequently, our research object, by referencing five key figures, each representing a distinct and well-established scholarly tradition: David Damrosch, Itamar Even-Zohar, Pierre Bourdieu, Antoine Berman, and Gianfranco Folena[3].

The early 2000s debate on world literature, in which Damrosch was a leading figure, enabled us to reconsider the role of translation in the world literary system, demonstrating that translation is not a second-hand activity but rather the primary generative practice of world literature itself: without translations, world literature would simply not exist (Damrosch 2003).

The polysystem theory of Itamar Even-Zohar, one of the founders of modern translation studies, clarified that translations should not be considered isolated objects but as elements of a system which is itself an integral part of each domestic literary system—that of 'translated literature' (Even-Zohar 1978: 21-27). To emphasize this concept, we incorporated this notion into the very title of our research project.

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[2] For the institutional and scientific history of the project, see the project website: www.ltit.it.

[3] For a more detailed theoretical framework, see Sisto 2024: 207-236.

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of symbolic goods enabled us to proceed to a detailed analysis of this system and its internal dynamics. It conceptualizes translation producers (translators, publishers, critics, etc.) as agents within the 'literary field', just like producers of domestic literature. Consequently, publishing a translation constitutes a 'position-taking' within the field, equivalent to publishing a novel, founding a magazine, or awarding a literary prize (Bourdieu 1992; 2002; 2023). We thus argue that translated literature is fundamentally an ordinary product of each literary system and should be investigated as such.

Central to our textual analysis was the work of Antoine Berman, who pioneered a stylistics of translation. Berman contends that translations are not just derivative texts but relatively autonomous works. Consequently, their aesthetic value requires evaluation primarily within the environment of the target literature: its conventions, the translator's poetics, the publisher's objectives—in short, the immediate context of its domestic reception (Berman 1995).

Finally, the language historian Gianfranco Folena provided us with an authoritative example of how to construct an alternative history of Italian literature—one that assigns significant space to translations while questioning the methodological nationalism of even the most illustrious dominant models, from Francesco De Sanctis' *Storia della letteratura italiana* onward (Folena 1972: 57-120).

Initially, our project envisioned reconstructing the 'history and digital maps of German literature in Italy' (this was its official title), but the vast theoretical reflections here represented by these five scholars led us to repeatedly redefine the object and goals of our research. A history of German literature in Italy, which at first was our final goal, emerged as merely an arbitrary fragment of the broader history encompassing all translated literatures. Consequently, we thoroughly revised the project and renamed it 'Translated Literature in Italy'.

Even this formulation, however, seemed inadequate, because it isolated translations from the rest of literary production. Many of the most authoritative 'histories of translations' undertaken in France or the UK have chosen, with good reasons, to treat what we call 'translated literature' as an autonomous object of study. By contrast, we deemed it more appropriate to investigate the production of translations as an integral component of each culture's literary activity. Thus, we established the

goal of producing a *transnational*—or *intercultural*—history of Italian literature that, through the systematic inclusion of translations, reveals its profound, complex, and enduring relationships with the world's other literatures.

3. The Database

To develop at least a preliminary understanding of this world literature made in Italy—which constitutes an integral part of Italian literature—we first undertook a comprehensive census. For this purpose, we created the database *LTit — Letteratura tradotta in Italia: Testi, contesti, protagonisti* [Translated Literature in Italy: Texts, Contexts, Protagonists: www.ltit.it], specifically structured to map translations. Rather than aiming for a complete census—which would require extensive resources—we sought to collect an initial dataset to experiment with a particular method of organizing this information. *LTit* differs significantly from the bibliographic database of the Italian National Library Service (OPAC SBN), though the latter serves as one of our primary sources. Our database relates what we call *opere* (works in their original languages) to both their *traduzioni* (translations, conceived as immaterial texts) and their diverse *edizioni* (the books and journals in which they are published and republished).

Visualizing these relationships was crucial for our research. Based on the collected data, an infographic produced by HCE Web Agency (which manages the website) enables users to see at a glance, for instance, that Goethe's *Werther*, as an *opera*, encompasses approximately twenty *traduzioni*, most of them published in multiple *edizioni* (Fig. 1). This allows assessment of the historical significance of certain translations, which sometimes dominated entire epochs. The first *Werther* translation to appear in Italy, by Gaetano Grassi in 1782, was also the most widespread and enduring for an extended period, republished in various places (the Florentine edition by Piatti, dated 1808, is highlighted in the figure) until the early 20th century. Further research revealed that for decades, Italians read Goethe's novel predominantly through Grassi's crude rewriting—based on a French translation—which was replete with omissions and accompanied by a highly biased preface. These manipulations, though customary at the time, fundamentally altered

the text's meaning: *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, originally a parody of early 18th-century sentimental novels, became—as Grassi's subtitle proclaimed—an "opera di sentimento" (a sentimental novel). Such cases are arguably more the rule than the exception.

Recognizing that institutions (publishing houses, journals) and gatekeepers (translators, series editors, consultants, agents, etc.) frequently mediate multiple literatures, our data collection—initially focused on German translations—expanded to encompass Scandinavian, Anglo-American, Russian, and Czech literature. Currently, approximately 7,500 works and 3,000 gatekeepers have been mapped. We aim to extend this experimental collection to include as many literatures as possible—potentially all—from Ancient Greek to Modern Japanese.

4. The Trajectories

As we have seen, Grassi's translation of *Werther* was undoubtedly the most widely read during the nineteenth century. Of course, while circulation figures are important, numbers alone cannot tell the full story. Our socio-historical investigations—often originating from database findings but developed through wider scholarly work, resulting in numerous essays and volumes—have established, for instance, that the era's most significant literary translation was another: published a few years later, in 1788, by the Paduan Jacobin Michiel Salom. Despite few re-editions, it was read by pivotal authors like Ugo Foscolo and Giacomo Leopardi, substantially influencing their work.

To bridge the *quantitative* collection of bibliographic data and the *qualitative* analysis central to literary research, we devised what *LTit* terms *traiettorie* (trajectories), a concept borrowed from Bourdieu. His field theory urges moving beyond the biographical approach still dominant in literary studies, redirecting attention to each author's concrete relationships with contemporary agents and institutions—relationships that shape their choices more profoundly than presumed personality traits. Our *traiettorie* trace gatekeepers' positions and position-takings within their 'field', documenting encounters, friendships, travels, and commissions, etc., year-by-year in a *cronologia* section (chronology), then synthesizing this material in discursive essays. For example, *Michiel Salom e la letteratura tedesca* [MS and German Literature]

(Fig. 2) explores why Salom learned German (unusual at the time), how he initiated his *Werther* translation, which literary circles he engaged with, what poetics (of translation) influenced him, and so forth.

In our research's first phase, the initial *traiettorie* focused on German-literature gatekeepers during the years of the literary journal *La Voce* (1908–1914), which is widely acknowledged as pivotal to the renewal of early 20th-century Italian literature. These include renowned literati whose translational roles remain understudied, such as Giuseppe Prezzolini, Giovanni Papini, Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, and Scipio Slataper. Extending to later decades, we examined writers (Curzio Malaparte, Tommaso Landolfi, Elio Vittorini, Vittorio Sereni, Enrico Filippini, Primo Levi), academics (Giuseppe Gabetti), theater directors (Vito Pandolfi), and publishers (Luigi Rusca). Particularly revealing were findings on what might be termed 'pure translators'—figures like Andrea Maffei, Vincenzo Errante, Giacomo Prampolini, and Alberto Spaini, whose artistry emerged primarily through their translations. For many such figures—deemed marginal in Italian literary history—few or no studies existed, necessitating intensive archival work that often began with locating their personal archives where available.

This was especially true for women translators. Rediscovering remarkable yet neglected figures—Lavinia Mazzucchetti, Rosina Pisaneschi, Barbara Allason, Alessandra Scalero, alongside the better-known Gabriella Bemporad and Cristina Campo—prompted deeper reflection on women's role in translation. This led to the conference *La donna invisibile. Traduttrici nell'Italia del primo Novecento* [The Invisible Woman: Women Translators in Early 20th-Century Italy], later published as a volume.

5. The Series, the Journal

To create a recognizable editorial home for our research and accommodate other studies at risk of being lost in disciplinary interstices, we established a book series with Quodlibet publishing house under the project's name: *Letteratura tradotta in Italia*. To date, fifteen titles have been published, organized around three thematic strands (often intersecting within single volumes): the first investigates—primarily through Bourdieu's lens—the historical-social contexts that shaped li-

terary translation production across eras (Nos. 9, 12, 14 in the list below); the second, extending our work on trajectories, focuses on gatekeepers like Lavinia Mazzucchetti, Leone Traverso, Franco Fortini, and the "invisible women translators" (Nos. 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13); the third, incorporating Berman's insights, analyzes translated texts and their underlying poetics (Nos. 3, 4, 15); the fourth synthesizes these approaches to outline chapters for a translation-inclusive Italian literary history (Nos. 1, 2, 8).

The *Letteratura tradotta in Italia* Series (2018–2025)[4]

1. Anna Baldini, Daria Biagi, Stefania De Lucia, Irene Fantappiè, Michele Sisto, *La letteratura tedesca in Italia. Un'introduzione 1900–1920*
2. Michele Sisto, *Traiettorie. Studi sulla letteratura tradotta in Italia*
3. Alessandro Niero, *Tradurre poesia russa. Analisi e autoanalisi*
4. Martina Mengoni, *'I sommersi e i salvati' di Primo Levi. Storia di un libro*
5. Irene Fantappié, *Franco Fortini e la poesia europea. Riscritture di autorialità*
6. Giulia Marcucci, *Čechov in Italia. La duchessa d'Andria e altre traduzioni*
7. Alice Gardoncini, *Tradurre la luna. I romantici tedeschi in Tommaso Landolfi*
8. Daria Biagi, *Prosaici e moderni. Teoria, traduzione e pratica del romanzo nell'Italia del Novecento*
9. Anna Baldini, *A regola d'arte. Storia e geografia del campo letterario italiano*
10. Anna Antonello, *Una germanista scapigliata. Vita e opere di Lavinia Mazzucchetti*

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[4] Here is an approximate translation of the 15 titles: 1. *German Literature in Italy. An introduction 1900-1920*; 2. *Trajectories. Studies on Translated Literature in Italy*; 3. *Translating Russian Poetry. Analysis and Self-Analysis*; 4. *Primo Levi's 'The Drowned and the Saved'. Transnational Genesis of a Book*; 5. *Franco Fortini and European Poetry. Rewritings of Authorships*; 6. *Chekhov in Italy. Enrichetta Carafa d'Andria and Other Translators*; 7. *Translating the Moon. Tommaso Landolfi and German Romanticism*; 8. *Prosaic and Modern. Theory, Translation and Practice of the Novel in 20th Century Italy*; 9. *By the Rule of the Art. History and Geography of the Italian Literary Field*; 10. *The Life and Translations of Lavinia Mazzucchetti, Unbridled Germanist*; 11. *Translating is like Writing. Leone Traverso and Hugo von Hofmannsthal*; 12. *Field Theory, Transnational Turn, and Literary History*; 13. *The Invisible Woman. Women Translators in Early 20th Century Italy*; 14. *The Space of Possibles. Studies on the Italian Literary Field*; 15. *American Rhythms. Essays on Style and Translation*.

11. Flavia Di Battista, *Tradurre è come scrivere. Leone Traverso e Hugo von Hofmannsthal*
12. Anna Boschetti, *Teoria dei campi, Transnational Turn e storia letteraria*
13. Anna Baldini, Giulia Marcucci (eds.), *La donna invisibile. Traduttrici nell'Italia del primo Novecento*
14. Anna Baldini, Michele Sisto (eds.), *Lo spazio dei possibili. Studi sul campo letterario italiano*
15. Franco Nasi, *Ritmi americani. Saggi su stile e traduzione*

Beyond this series, we facilitated two additional publications with Quodlibet: Anna Boschetti's *Benedetto Croce. Dominio simbolico e storia intellettuale* [BC. Symbolic Domination and Intellectual History, 2024], and Pierre Bourdieu's *Imperialismi. Circolazione internazionale delle idee e lotte per l'universale* [Imperialisms: The International Circulation of Ideas and the Struggle for the Universal, 2025].

Project outcomes further include approximately 100 articles in national/international journals, the organization of over a dozen conferences/seminars, and extensive participation by team members in academic events across Italy and abroad[5].

In 2023, the group co-founded *ri.tra: rivista di traduzione*, a journal dedicated principally to the history of translations in Italy[6]. It publishes peer-reviewed *traiettorie* from *LTit*, and its second issue is focused on *Traduzioni magistrali* [Masterful Translations]—from Paolo Rolli's 18th-century *Hamlet* monologue to Furio Jesi's 20th-century Rilke renditions (Filippi-Sisto 2024: 7-256).

6. The Networks, the Institutions

The project's scope required international and interdisciplinary collaboration. Beyond institutional partnerships with universities (Chieti-Pescara, Sapienza Roma, Siena Stranieri, HU Berlin) and research bodies (Rome's Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici; Milan's Fondazione Mondadori; Paris's CESSPL), we forged alliances with other research

[5] For a full list, see https://www.ltit.it/progetto/pubblicazioni and https://www.ltit.it/progetto/eventi.

[6] S. https://ojs.unito.it/index.php/ritra.

projects (*Mapping Literary Space*; *Irish in Italy*[7]), as well as with journals (*tradurre*; *allegoria*[8]), and book series (*Studien zur Übersetzungsgeschichte*[9]) for dissemination.

In spring 2021, a webinar series surveyed analogous research on translated literatures in Italy (French, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, etc.), yielding contributions from twenty-seven scholars working on translated literatures in Italy (French, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, Romanian, Czech, Neo-Greek, etc.). Findings appeared in the volume *Le ricerche sulla letteratura tradotta in Italia. Una ricognizione su progetti e banche dati* [Research on Translated Literature in Italy: A Survey of Projects and Databases, 2025] (Antonello-Paladin 2025), with collaborations expected to inform future funding bids for Italy-focused studies on translated literature.

Finally, as part of our ongoing effort to create and strengthen institutions promoting the study of this topic, our group played a role in establishing the Centro Studi sulla Traduzione (CeST) in Siena (2021), the History and Translation Network (HTN)—an international and multidisciplinary network of scholars working on translations (2022)—and the Doctorate program in Studi di Traduzione at the Università per Stranieri in Siena (2024)[10].

7. A New Literary History?

In the collective volume *La letteratura tedesca in Italia. Un'introduzione 1900-1920* [German Literature in Italy: An Introduction], which inaugurated our series in 2018, we presented a programmatic synthesis

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[7] *Mapping Literary Space*: Literary Journals, Publishing Firms and Intellectuals in Italy, 1940-1960, PI Daniela La Penna, University of Reading, 2012-2015; *Irish in Italy: Irish Literature and Politics in Italy in the First Half of the 20th Century*, PI Antonio Bibbò, University of Manchester, 2014-2017.

[8] *tradurre: teorie pratiche strumenti* (https://rivistatradurre.it/); *allegoria: per uno studio materialistico della letteratura* (https://www.allegoriaonline.it/).

[9] *Studien zur Übersetzungsgeschichte*, Stuttgart, Steiner-Verlag (https://www.steiner-verlag.de/brand/Studien-zur-Uebersetzungsgeschichte).

[10] See https://www.centrocest.it/; https://historyandtranslation.net/; https://www.unistrasi.it/1/759/8267/Dottorato_in_Studi_di_traduzione.htm.

of our methodological approach and anticipated outcomes. Adopting a transnational and socio-historical perspective required rewriting segments of Italian literary history for the examined period. We expanded our corpus substantially to include translations and analyzed the conditions enabling their production. Gradually, the contours of a system emerged—demonstrably integral to the Italian literary system: the same writers and critics who produced, discussed, and consecrated seminal domestic works like Papini's *Un uomo finito* [The Failure] or Slataper's *Il mio Carso* [My Carso] also engaged with Italian translations of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Novalis's *Frammenti* [Fragments], and Hölderlin's *Iperione* [Hyperion]. These translations were infused with the same strategies and poetics that shaped the avant-garde's domestic output. Thus emerged at least one chapter of the Italian-and-world literary history our research seeks to reconstruct, at least in its essential outlines.

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Sitography

LTit: www.ltit.it
ri.tra.: https://ojs.unito.it/index.php/ritra

EDIZIONE
Werther, opera di sentimento, Guglielmo Piatti, Firenze
1808
1782
Johann Wolfgang Goethe
Die Leiden des jungen Werther
1774

Figura 1

Michiel Salom

Padova, 21 aprile 1751 – Padova, 1 maggio 1837

INFORMAZIONI

CRONOLOGIA

TRADUZIONI (9)

EDIZIONI (12)

MICHIEL SALOM E LA LETTERATURA TEDESCA

Un giacobino traduttore di Goethe

STAMPA

La formazione e i primi contatti con la cultura tedesca

Sebbene sulla sua vita si abbiano solo notizie frammentarie, Michiel Salom è sicuramente uno dei più importanti conoscitori e traduttori di letteratura tedesca vissuti in Italia nella burrascosa età compresa fra la Rivoluzione francese e il Congresso di Vienna: Foscolo, Leopardi e molti altri leggono il *Werther* di Goethe nella sua traduzione (Manacorda 2001, 57-68), mentre quelle dell'*Emilia Galotti* di Lessing e della *Geschichte des Agathon* (*Istoria di Agatone*) di Wieland circolano ampiamente tra i letterati più fedeli agli ideali illuministici negli anni delle guerre napoleoniche, della Repubblica cisalpina e del Regno d'Italia.

Laureatosi in medicina nel 1771 (Modena, Morpurgo 1967, 101), Salom esercita la professione dentro e fuori dal ghetto di Padova fino al suo arresto per giacobinismo nel 1793. Così si presenta in una lettera a Christoph Martin Wieland:

> Io sono uno sprepuziato e checché ne pensi il popolo pregiudicato, il Filosofo non prenderà da ciò solo argomenti per disistimarmi. Nato in Padova e propenso alle lettere, vi studiai la Medicina, unica scienza non interdetta, e l'ho esercitata parecchj anni, sinché non prevedure vicende non me ne distolsero la pratica. (Fancelli 1981)

Figura 2