Introduction
Translation Criticism in Defence of the Profession

John Dodds
SSLM, Università di Trieste

This first pilot issue of the *Rivista internazionale di tecnica della traduzione* (N° 0) is a review designed to meet some of the requirements expressed during two recent and extremely important conferences held here in Trieste: the first, *Autori e traduttori a confronto*\(^1\), was a meeting between two internationally renowned Italian authors, Umberto Eco and Claudio Magris, and their many translators who have provided target versions of *Il nome della rosa* and *Danubio* in a multitude of languages; the second conference, *Editori e traduttori a confronto*\(^2\), organized along similar lines, created a forum of discussion between translators (literary, sci/tech and lexicographical), their professional associations and major publishing houses on the many problems existing in this relationship and particularly on how to reconcile working conditions, deadlines and remuneration with translation quality.

What emerged from both conferences was that today there seems very much to be the need to reinstate the translator to the status s/he once had of being a member of one of the most time-honoured and highly-respected professions known to man. Indeed, world literature in its present form is virtually inconceivable should there not have been the painstakingly complex work of the translator, through whom new cultures, forms of expression and different ways of thinking were transmitted across language barriers. Without translators, Horace would never have known Homer’s Odyssey, Greek poetry would have had virtually no influence on the writing of Latin verse, the Arab world would never have known the works of Classical Greece and Rome and, conversely, Arab literature would have had little or no influence in Spain; the Bible itself would certainly never have reached us in anything like its present form, with the result that Catholicism would most certainly be something quite different from what it is today and, without Luther’s translation of the Bible, Protestantism may well never have been born. English literature too would be quite unrecognizable: Chaucer would never have known Dante, Petrarchism would simply have been a concept restricted to learned Italianists, Shakespeare’s and Milton’s works would have been very different from what they are, Neo-Classicism may well never have existed and, as for Romanticism, it is anybody’s guess what might have become of it without foreign influence.

Nor should the translators themselves be forgotten, many of them great poets too, whose own poetical works were greatly influenced by their translations; just think, for example, of John Dryden, Alexander Pope, William Cowper, Thomas Carlyle, Byron, Shelley and Arnold, and, over the Atlantic, Longfellow and Pound, to name only very few (for further discussion on the history of translation and translators cfr. Tytler 1907; Cary 1956; Savory 1957; Bassnett-McGuire 1980; Dodds 1983; Dodds 1989).

And to think that literary translation probably represents less than 10% of translation work currently going on in Europe and the rest of the world! What this means in simple terms is that over 90% of all translation activity in the world is non-literary in nature, covering scientific and technical translation — from specialized texts on medicine to nuclear physics, peer-writing in general (cfr. Trimble 1985), text books for scholastic purposes, manuals, instructions and handbooks for technicians. It includes translation of political and economic texts in the big international organizations (the EC, the UN, UNESCO, the FAO, the WHO and foreign ministries of individual nation states being the

\(^1\) The Proceedings of this Conference are currently being printed, and will be available from Campanotto editore, via Micheliini 1, Udine, later this year.

\(^2\) Notice of the publication of these proceedings will be given in the next issue of this review, but they should be available towards the end of 1993.
biggest employers of translators in the world today — not to mention security agencies like the CIA in the United States). It includes the translation of financial texts, budgets, budget forecasts and the like (texts for the World Bank, the IMS, international banks in general and multinationals). It includes lexicographical translation (for example, Collins Publishers, one of the largest in the field of bilingual dictionaries, over the last ten years have produced more or less 150 bilingual dictionaries in one form or another, an amazing output averaging no fewer than 15 dictionaries per year, which is particularly significant considering that even the small Collins/Giunti Concise Italian Dictionary had a team of more than twenty people working on it). It includes the translation of legal, bureaucratic and administrative texts (particularly where international law is involved, or where countries or regions have bilingual status, as is the case in parts of Italy, in Belgium and Canada, to name but a few). It includes the translation of advertising spots and slogans, particularly when products are sold on an international or worldwide basis, which is true for all of the most important makes of cars, household appliances, home and personal computers, car tyres, soap powders, fashion wear and a host of other items which have become household names everywhere.

Peter Newmark gives some interesting data regarding translation when he states:

The setting up of a new international body, the constitution of an independent state, the formation of a multi-national company, gives translation enhanced political importance. The exponential increase in technology (patents, specifications, documentation), the attempt to bring it to developing countries, the simultaneous publication of the same book in various languages, the increase in world communication, has correspondingly increased requirements. UNESCO, which up to 1970 published an index translationum, recorded a 4.5 fold increase since 1948, with translations into German nearly twice as many as into Russian, the second most numerous. (…). Scientific, technical and medical journals are translated wholesale in the USA and USSR. The EEC now employs 1600 translators. In 1967, 80,000 scientific journals were being translated annually (Spitzbart 1972). Some ‘international’ writers (…) immediately sell more widely in translation than in the original, whilst others in Italy and the smaller European countries depend for a living on the translations of their works … (1981: 3-4).

As most of this information dates back to the 1970s and early 1980s, it would be interesting to obtain more up-to-date statistics regarding our profession although, even guessing, it seems more than likely that if there was a 4.5 fold increase in the twenty-two-year period going from 1948 to 1970, then there has surely been as much again, if not a very great deal more, in the twenty-two-year period from 1970 to 1992. And it is anybody’s guess how much the annual increase in translation activity will increase in Europe from 1993 onwards with the implementation of the European Single Act!

Yet, in spite of all these considerations regarding his/her fundamental role and importance in the societies and cultures of our modern world, the status of the translator generally remains somewhat low (there are exceptions of course!); s/he has become a sort of second-class citizen and translation the Cinderella of the professions. Why this is so, why s/he has lost the fame and fortune of predecessors like Dryden, Pope, Byron and company, is probably due to his/her having been discredited as unreliable, inaccurate and above all as a necessary evil, as is more than clear from the highly malicious cliché traduttori traditori, putting him/her squarely in the same category as one of the most infamous translators in history, Judas Iscariot. The translator has gone, in most cases, from riches to rags; his/her work is said to be the prostitution of the original and hence often ridiculed, if not for its mistakes, then for its failure to convey the totality, the ‘whole’ of the original into a target language. But with regard to such a utopia, we can only concur with Nicolas Berdiaeff’s infinitely wise observation when he says that

peut-être un siècle nouveau commence-t-il, un siècle où les intellectuels et la classe cultivée rêveront aux moyens d’éviter les utopies et de retourner à une société non utopique, moins parfaite et plus libre.

This, for translators, may well be true for the approaching 21st century when we should be seeing the translator reinstated to his/her primary role in our modern world, a role that will give him/her the freedom, both financially and professionally, to produce accurately, reliably and efficiently without the restraints of looking for perfection. The quest for superior quality, which is attainable, gives far greater freedom than does the quest for perfection, which, when all is said and done, is unattainable.

Hence our desire to publish a new review on translation with two initial experimental numbers (this year No 0 and next year No 00) — a review, we hope, that
will differ substantially from the majority of reviews already on the market, which tend to concentrate rather more on the theoretical, abstract aspects of translation. We would like this review to shape into an essentially critical review of previously published translations both of a literary and of a non-literary nature (with perhaps rather more emphasis being given to the latter, as very little is at present being done in this area). It is intended as a kind of instrument of quality control (a) to be of practical use to translators in order to help them face a whole variety of problems as they arise and (b) as a reference point of quality assessment for both translators and publishers, if you like, translators publishing for their peers. This does not mean in the least that the review will be a means for ‘attacking’ colleagues in the worst sense of the word ‘criticism’, but rather it should be a defensive weapon, one designed to protect and improve the profession, and not an offensive weapon in both senses of the word ‘offensive’, which would be purely destructive and of no help to anyone. The review should be seen as an instrument through which, rather like the surgeon’s scalpel, one tends to cut out and destroy the bad so that what remains is healthy and of high quality. It should never become an instrument that is destructive, but should rather be constructive; it should never humiliate the translator, but should enhance his/her qualities.

This is the real sense of the word ‘criticism’, so often seen negatively and wrongly as a ‘beauty killer’, and the critic him/herself should no longer be considered that "nasty little busybody" who, to slightly adapt the words of George Bernard Shaw, criticizes simply because s/he cannot do the job him/herself. In this review, the critics will be professional translators who can do the job themselves looking at the work of other professional translators, hopefully with the result that their job of criticism will have a four-fold function.

One: as stated above, translation criticism should have an empirical function of practical use to translators and theorists alike, for it should constitute an analysis of specific and general problems posed by the various source language originals and by problems arising from the analysis of the solution or solutions offered by the translator/s in the target language version/s. This sort of criticism aims at showing the technical complexity of individual texts or indeed of text types in general, their lexical and syntactic complexity as well as their diachronic complexity in the case of older texts that have been newly translated in order to assess to what extent, how and how well these linguistic structures have been rendered in translation.

Two: no less important is that function of translation criticism pertaining to style study or stylistics for, by stating what should be reproduced, imitated, modified or omitted, style itself is being described and thus defined. This is particularly important for the description of the style of text types and the discussion of how and to what extent stylistic characteristics do or do not overlap in the translation from one language to another. This function of translation criticism is also important diachronically when more than one translation is being examined, particularly over a more or less long time span, when diachronic variation of styles is manifest in the target language versions. Such variation, for instance, can be seen in no uncertain terms when comparing the styles, say, of the English translations of Dante’s *Inferno* in the imitative Neo-Classical tradition as opposed to those elaborated in the metaphrastic Victorian tradition (Dodds 1983: 22-31 & 47-61).

The third function of translation criticism is strictly linked to the second in that it indicates synchronic and/or diachronic variation, but this time with social/historical implications, since translation criticism is also very much a written, historical record, a document of the critical evaluations made by one person with regard to the work of another person or persons and therefore of a given member of society regarding another group within that same or some previous society. This record or historical document is also extremely useful for putting translation theory into its true perspective; namely it establishes the real relationship that theory has with practice in that it is through criticism that one can ascertain how and to what extent translation practioners interpret the theorists at the moment of writing — if at all.

The last function of translation criticism can best be summed up in a couple of questions. Should translation criticism be prescriptive or purely descriptive? Should the critic limit him/herself to merely pointing out mistranslations, overtranslations and under-translations, or should s/he have the courage (or some would say the bravura) to go one step further by suggesting a (more) correct solution or solutions? Peter Newmark in one of his recent *Paragraphs* (Newmark 1991: 149) states quite correctly that I myself, in the past, have wrongly claimed to be a descriptivist, back in the days when his own maxim "you don’t have to be a cook to criticize the cooking" was still fresh in my mind. Since then, however, I have come round to thinking that pure description, if indeed such a thing be possible, is hardly desirable. Firstly because the moment that an
omission, say, is described, there is the implicit prescription that something (albeit unspecified) should be there in its place. Secondly, because it is surely due to the absence of prescription that criticism has acquired such a bad name. Too often criticism becomes negative and destructive when the critic indulges in an orgy of 'error-spotting' without indicating why and the wherefore of the errors found in the translation and without any explanation as to how the errors can be eliminated and the translation quality improved. It is surely this last function of translation criticism that, without being 'offensive' to anyone, best represents a weapon in defence of the profession and quality in translation. It is surely this that is meant when referring to translation criticism as a "weapon" (Newmark 1993). Indeed, the above-mentioned functions of translation criticism are very nicely summed up by Newmark himself (1988: 184) when he states that it is an essential link between translation theory and its practice; it is also an enjoyable and instructive exercise, particularly if you are criticizing someone else's translation or, even better, two or more translations of the same text. (...) You may soon become aware not only of the large 'taste area', but that a text may be differently translated, depending on the preferred method of the translator.

We hope that the various reviews in the Rivista internazionale di tecnica della traduzione (RITT) will continue and develop the sort of translation criticism that we, at the Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori (SSLM) here in Trieste, have been advocating for some time now, along the lines of the above-mentioned principles. Obviously the reviews are bound to be rather short, but the principles remain the same, as does the intention to improve quality and enhance the translator's position in the world today. In this present issue, there are articles of a general nature, for example on the subject of the utility of translation schools (Gile), on linguistics and translation (Halliday); there are reviews of theoretical works (Viaggio, Brady), reviews of technical translation (Rega, Scarpa, Giambaglia), a lexicographical review (Musacchio), of course numerous reviews of literary translations, and even a review concerning the translation of a documentary film commentary.

In the next and following issues, we would like to maintain these three main sections (general/theoretical, literary and non-literary), if possible creating a greater balance between reviews on literary and non-literary translation (literature still seems to represent the main attraction for reviewers in spite of the fact that it is only a very small part of the translation activity going on in the world at present). The working languages of the Rivista will be English, French, Italian, German and Spanish, though in future we ask those of you not writing in English to present your contributions together with a list of Key Words and an Abstract in English for those readers who do not understand the other languages. The deadline for contributions for the next issue is the 31st of December 1992 and we do ask you to send us your articles on a Macintosh diskette in Word together with a printout and your bibliographies following the guidelines set out on the sheet enclosed with your copy of the Rivista. Until the next issue then, buona lettura and good reviewing!

Trieste, April 1992

John M. Dodds

Bibliography