

Translators down the Covid hole

Eva Valvo

During the first days of lockdown in Italy the ‘translators’ bubble’ on social media was full of memes and funny comments about the fact that nothing had really changed for literary translators, as their daily life has always been a life in isolation. That idea didn’t last long.

As I write this article at the beginning of April, schools have been closed for six weeks and the Government’s lockdown measures have been gradually increasing and ended up being among the strictest in Europe. The economic impact will be hard, while Covid-19 claims victims every day. The stress levels among translators began to rise – people were lamenting their inability to read, translate or concentrate. When I asked for help with this article within my association, I was surprised by the number of messages from colleagues sharing their thoughts and emotions. I am quoting some of them without revealing their names, and I wish to thank them all for their insights.

Mother translators

Mothers spend most of the day on childcare and homeschooling.

One colleague wrote, “I have three children and I am being continuously interrupted. They need constant help with their online school platform, with printing, scanning, sending homework... Teachers do tremendous work, but all this is driving me crazy.” Another mother wrote, “Apparently my work has not changed, as I am still sitting at my desk at home, but everything around me has transformed.

“A huge concern about the future is undermining our ability for creative endeavour”

Do you really believe that working from home and childcare are compatible?” And another one, “At first, I thought

it was because I had a million things to do with my husband and three children at home all day, but now I believe it's something else. I am translating a children's book that requires creativity and humor, but I cannot write. It's as if the book's story was meaningless compared to what is happening out there."

A huge concern about the future, both of the publishing industry and the whole world, is undermining our ability for creative endeavour. Someone said to me, "My brain doesn't work and I can't even write an email or a chat message without making mistakes." And another, "I saw a Facebook picture of some Chinese doctors who came to Italy to help, and it felt like a slap in the face. There are people out there doing something useful, but what am I doing?" Such a sense of futility is not uncommon. "I've always felt with the characters of the novels that I translate, sharing their hopes and worries, but now a voice in my head tells me that it's fake. I have become a slower translator, and a worse one. But I hope to find again that fiction is truth, because I know that literature is life."

Compulsive news watching

Such isolation is paradoxical, as we're probably more connected than ever. An extraordinary information overload of scientific explanations, statistics, or fake news about the virus is swarming in our brains and draining our energy, not to mention the well-meaning suggestions about how to spend our quarantine. One translator said, "I am distracted by compulsively reading the news, but also by all the phone and video calls with family and friends."

Another one wrote, "There's a million online initiatives that make me feel inadequate because I can't do anything. I feel as if I had less time, not more."



Alice down the rabbit hole (from Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (Cassell and Co. 1907). Illustrator: Charles Robinson



Eva Valvo, a literary translator from Danish and Norwegian into Italian, is a board member of [Strade](#), the literary translators' union in Italy.

Eva Valvo
Photo: Peter Ciaccio

Fortunately, not everyone is affected by this 'translator's block'. A colleague told me, "In spite of all this, I translate. I never stop. Translation is my only window, the only open horizon for all of us. I'm sure that it will be the only thing that will eventually heal us. As always." If we are to learn something from this collective shock, it might be that we need to cherish our time and that literary translation, like all creative work, needs time and care. We're used to pressing deadlines, rushing from one book fair to the next, but we must not forget our main task – creating world literature that can heal souls, even in critical times.

"Translation is my only window, the only open horizon for all of us"

Believing in the healing power of words, CEATL and its Italian members Strade and AITI promoted a joint project with FIT and the Bologna Children's Book Fair, by translating a Coronavirus-rhyme by Italian author Roberto Piumini into some thirty languages. You can find it online as a message of hope among the resources of the Bologna Book Fair's [online special edition](#).

*Words are presents, words are seeds,
they're gifts that we have plenty of
and if they're good they're all we need,
when we're apart, to grow our love.*

(From "Is There Something in the Air?" by Roberto Piumini, translated by Leah Janeczko)