

Confessions of a co-editor

I appear on the cover of the Italian translation of *Zong!* as the co-editor of the book, together with Renata Morresi. I am an Italian writer and translator, I have a Ph.D. in Japanese literature (I specialized in classical poetry), and even though I am not a professional scholar I have several publications in my name. Among these, the Italian translation of *Holocaust* by Charles Reznikoff, which was published by Benway Series in 2014.

I discovered *Zong!* by chance, probably one year or so after it was published, in a bookstore in Chicago, where I used to live at the time. Right away, I was deeply impressed by a text that conjugates some very advanced and radical writing techniques and the capacity to face great historical themes and traumas with an energy and a directness that are often lacking in experimental writing.

I owe my first critical opinion about *Zong!* precisely to the fact that I had previously translated *Holocaust*, because I was struck by the similarities I saw between the two works. Reznikoff works on the proceedings of the Nuremberg trials, Philip on a very short legal decision. Reznikoff condensates to the extreme tens of thousands of pages, while Philip expands two pages until she turns them into a universe. These books operate in ways that are at the same time similar and deeply different, in order to face two of the greatest tragedies of the modern era – the slave trade and the Final solution –; and this is one of the main reasons for my interest and love for them.

For me, loving a foreign book also means imagining it, dreaming of it in Italian. A love that needs to be shared and that enriches anyone who is reached by it. So I was thrilled to contribute, over several years, to the birth of a book that I strongly believe brings something new to Italian literature and that I also hope will contribute to the improvement of a society that greatly needs it.

Very few things in life are more painful than an act of love that is refused, or misunderstood, or accused of being an act of violence. To Philip's refusal to endorse this book, Mariangela Guatteri and Giulio Marzaioli for Benway Series, Renata Morresi as the translator have already replied with words that I share one by one. In order not to repeat what they have already said, I have written a list of remarks and questions which were aroused from what happened after the publication of the translation, first in private and subsequently in public. I hope that they will generate answers but most of all other questions, again and again. Because this is the best homage I can imagine to the art of *Zong!*, in the original, in its Italian translation, and in all of its future translations.

The question before all the questions

When we talk about the slave trade, we talk about the wound caused by a process of absolute dehumanization and expropriation. And it is legitimate to say that only the victims and their descendants have the right to talk about it. Still, what about the responsibility of those who do not participate in the trauma of the oppressed but refuse to align with the oppressors? And therefore, how can we turn all this into a positive attitude, not projected exclusively on the past but also on the future?

1. Once it has been made public, does a work of art still belong to its author? Not in the sense of intellectual property, but in the sense of the freedom of interpretation for each user. For example, it is taken for granted that it is necessary to consult with an author when one of his or her books is being translated. But is this really so? Once an author has published a work, is the understanding he or she has of it really superior to any other? And even if it were so, what remains of this understanding in the course of a translation into a foreign language, with all its peculiarities?
2. Racial tensions exist in Europe too, unfortunately, but their history and current dynamics are different from the ones in North America. Can we really apply such

North-American dynamics to a cultural operation that stems from a largely different context? It is a matter of fact that Italy deeply suffers from a heavy colonial past, that to this day has not yet been sufficiently elaborated. However, I think that the imposition of the North-American post-colonial discourse on a continental European context – not the dialogue, but its imposition as a presumed universal principle – is in itself a colonial act. How do we face this paradox? Where is the point where we can at least try to come together and talk about it?

3. I consider the tribalism of communication to be one of the most negative consequences of postmodern individualism. Do we really want a world in which we can only dialogue if we already agree on everything, where we cannot even conceive that differences and disagreements can exist that are not imbued with meanness, violence, suspicion, mutual mistrust? Do we really want a world where no translation is needed, while I consider translation to be one of noblest arts?
4. Furthermore, I do not believe that identities exist in the form of pre-defined essences. We constitute ourselves, literally we exist only within dialogue, within the confrontation between different positions and points of view. If, on the contrary, we only rely on given identities, nothing good will ever come out of it: it will only generate a hostile distance or, even worse, the victory of the strongest.
5. Any work of art is created in the hope of changing, at least to some degree, the society from which it arises. *Zong!* is a book that hopes to change many things, a hope that I wholeheartedly share. But Philip expresses this ambition in a very peculiar way: she says (on her Facebook page on September 10, 2021) that she has written a book that “has become a sacred text” and that therefore, it needs to be treated with some special precautions in order to change the world – for the better, as all sacred texts are fully certain that they are capable of doing, usually to the detriment of the others. Such precautions are obvious among believers, but does this make it a universal principle? Do I, an atheist, have the right to study – or even just touch – the Bible or the Koran even if I do not belong to their religions? To which authority do I need to ask permission in order to *read* a book? After all, translation is an act of particularly deep reading. These questions are not new, and they resonate a lot in our times. I would be happy to talk with Philip about this, and even more to listen to her.
6. A small personal recollection regarding “Notanda”, the section of *Zong!* that I translated. At a certain point, Philip writes: “Henry Moore observed that his manner of working was to remove all extraneous material to allow the figure that was ‘locked’ in the stone to reveal itself.” Now, any Italian reader instantly recognizes in this sentence the first verses of a very famous sonnet by Michelangelo Buonarroti. Henry Moore was just paraphrasing his master.
If I were in bad faith, I could quote this small episode as a textbook example of cultural appropriation. Instead, I remember that I smiled the first time I read that sentence. I also remember that I thought – back then, I wasn’t yet aware that I have the gift of prophecy – how happy I was that Italian culture can propagate and give ideas to anyone even in these subterranean ways, and how horrified I would be of a world where that wouldn’t be possible.
Culture is made in order to be shared and used, by anyone and in any conceivable way. Culture by definition is contamination, appropriation, re-elaboration. Nothing and no-one exist in the void. Of course, this exposes everyone to the risk of misunderstandings, wrong turns, even very serious mistakes. But the alternative is a nightmare from which none of us may be able to awaken.

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