

## *Long Story Short: Do No Harm!*

First off, I wish to thank you all for inviting me to sit on the jury of this literary award. I have several reasons to be grateful to you. To begin with, today you gave me the opportunity to spend twenty minutes thinking about topics that have nothing to do with medical, legal, economic, fiscal or bureaucratic issues. It's a blessing!

Also, I love literature and I have translated a good number of texts (of various sorts) in the last 35 years or so. I mostly translate from Latin or Italian into English or from English into Italian. Until not long ago, I also used to serve as an interpreter. So, the AACUPI-Vieusseux contest is just right up my alley, as the saying goes.

As a literature buff, I enjoyed reading the short stories that were sent to us for this award. Writing short texts is far from easy. Addressing a friend of his, Mark Twain (or Oscar Wilde ... I don't remember right now) once said: "Sorry for sending you a long letter. I didn't have time to write a short one". It may sound paradoxical but it's true. Michelangelo used to say that painting is mostly about adding whereas sculpting is mostly about taking away ("per forza di levare", to quote his Italian words). To make a statue, the artist must remove material, so as to shape the figure ("eidōs" in Greek, that is, "idea" in English) in his or her mind. To a large extent, the same is true of writing. The first draft is always the longest. Then the author turns on what Hemingway used to call "the crap detector". Consequently, a ten-page text is reduced to half its original length or even less.

One of the reasons I like the short story that has won this award is that it reveals the nature of its protagonist little by little. It takes several paragraphs to understand who is 'speaking'. As a translator, my first reaction to any text that I have been asked to turn into another language is: "Don't spoil it. Try not to ruin it". That is also, by the way, the first idea that sprang to my mind as I walked into a classroom many years ago, a few weeks after I had been appointed high school teacher with a time-unlimited contract by the Italian Ministry of Education. I said to myself: "Don't ruin these kids! Treat them with care and respect". Likewise, when I first read *Uccellacci* (such is the definitive title of the award-winning short story) I immediately paid attention not to disclose from the start who the protagonist was (a mistake that I could have made, for instance, by translating in too informative a way, so to speak). I thus did my best to follow in the author's footsteps, as she (understandably enough) had been the first to pay the utmost attention to preserve that sense of vagueness and the 'suspense' that comes with it.

One last thing on translating (and on teaching too). I have often translated works by writers who are long gone; many of them died thousands or hundreds of years ago. But I have also had the opportunity to translate contemporary authors, with whom I could have a chat on their own works, including the very books I had been asked to translate. When this happens, the experience becomes particularly rewarding for all the parties involved. The reason being, a translated text gives its author the opportunity to better understand what he or she meant to say. It's a bit like a therapy session with a psychoanalyst. It can be compared to interpreting a dream together. Who had the dream may see things from a privileged position but the product of his or her mind is – to a certain extent – somewhat mysterious to that person too. A translation is thus an excellent chance not only to meet the author but also help the author – in a sense – meet himself or herself by better understanding what his or her original intentions were.

Teaching resembles translating in that the teacher is, above all, a mediator, a sort of liaison or 'matchmaker' between the students on the one hand and past artists, different cultures or significant historical figures on the other. More importantly, though, the teacher helps students meet themselves, that is, help them better understand who they were until not long ago, who they are now, and what kind of person they would like to become soon. And this is also the essence of studying abroad, as I'm sure all AACUPI students have already understood. That's why they call it "a transformative experience".

Thank you!