

XX. A Great Translator from Italian: William Weaver

William Weaver, whose translations of works by modern masters like Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco and Primo Levi helped lift Italian literature to prominence among readers of English, died on Tuesday in Rhinebeck, N.Y. He was 90.

His death was announced by Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., where Mr. Weaver taught in the 1990s, in a letter to Bard faculty, staff and students. He had a stroke several years ago that severely hampered his ability to speak — an especially difficult hardship, friends and relatives said, for a loquacious man who had built his life communicating in words.

“It was a brutal piece of irony, to tell the truth,” John Poulton, a nephew, said in a phone interview on Thursday.

A Virginian who first went to Italy during World War II, Mr. Weaver lived there for much of his adult life — mostly in a farmhouse in Tuscany — and over the years became a pre-eminent translator of modern Italian literature into English. His work embraced the highest echelons of modern Italian fiction, nonfiction, poetry, prose and opera librettos, translating relatively obscure works like “One, No One and One Hundred Thousand,” Luigi Pirandello’s 1926 novel about a man obsessively exploring facets of his own identity, as well as the international best seller “The Name of the

Rose,” Mr. Eco’s 1980 murder mystery set in a 14th-century monastery.

Deft in handling a variety of writing styles, from Calvino’s delicacy of language to Mr. Eco’s show-offy erudition, Mr. Weaver was prolific. He translated dozens of books, a dozen by Calvino alone, including “Invisible Cities,” which posits descriptive and philosophical conversations between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, and a collection of short stories, “Cosmicomics,” for which Mr. Weaver won a National Book Award for translation in 1969.

Mr. Weaver talked about his work in a 2000 interview in *The Paris Review*. “Some of the hardest things to translate into English from Italian are not great big words, such as you find in Eco, but perfectly simple things, **buon giorno** for instance,” he said. “How to translate that? We don’t say ‘good day,’ except in Australia. It has to be translated ‘good morning,’ or ‘good evening,’ or ‘good afternoon’ or ‘hello.’

“You have to know not only the time of day the scene is taking place, but also in which part of Italy it’s taking place,” he continued, “because in some places they start saying **buona sera** — ‘good evening’ — at 1 p.m. The minute they get up from the luncheon table it’s evening for them. So someone could say **buona sera**, but you can’t translate it as ‘good evening’ because the scene is taking place at 3 p.m. You need to know the language, but, even more, the life of the country.”

Text by Bruce Weber

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/17/arts/william-weaver-influential-translator-of-modern-italian-literature-dies-at-90.html>

Reading Guidelines:

Once you finish reading the text, loud or silent, summarize the main ideas and separate them from details. You have to differentiate between an idea and its expansion by supporting details.

Q.I Give the exact meaning of the following words first in English and second in Arabic: masters, prominence, stroke, hampered, loquacious, pre-eminent, embraced, echelons, librettos, obsessively, mystery, monastery, deft in, erudition, cosmicomics, luncheon .

Q.II Derive as many words as you can from the following words: masters, announced, president, brutal, variety, delicacy, interview, review, perfectly, except, scene .

Q.III Give the opposites of the words below and use them in good English sentences of your own: death, ability, difficult, adult life, highest, show-offy, hardest, perfectly.

Q.IV Answer the following questions briefly:

1. What translations of Weaver helped lift Italian literature to prominence?
2. Why did the stroke represent a difficult hardship for Weaver?
3. Did Weaver's long life in Italy help him become an eminent translator?
4. What did Weaver translate for Pirandello and Eco?
5. How was Weaver's experience in writing styles varied?
7. What does Calvino's "Invisible Cities" talk about?
8. Do you agree with Weaver that some of the hardest things to translate are not the great big words and that in addition to the language the translator must know the life of the country he is translating?

Q.V Translate the last two paragraphs into plain Arabic. What would you do with the Italian expressions in the text?

Research Activity:

1. Weaver's famous saying about translation is that it is something we learn by doing. Speak about the importance of practice first, and then move to talk about the importance of theory. Can the two be divorced?
2. List some Italian works translated into Arabic. Who are the translators? What books were translated for Calvino and Pirandello? By whom?

Quote of the Day:

The poet cannot hope to present his vision intact just as a translator cannot hope to present the poet's work unaltered."

Kimon Friar