BORDERS OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: THE RECEPTION OF PICTURE BOOKS IN ITALY AND THE QUESTION OF READING ALOUD

Abstract: This article opens with the concept of the “world republic of childhood” without geographical and political borders, as conceived by Hazard and promoted after the Second World War. According to O’Sullivan (2004, 2005), this concept of childhood, and consequently of children’s literature, is idealistic and does not address real problems connected with the process of translation. As a matter of fact, translating a book for children from one language into another is not as easy as it might seem: frontiers and custom houses do exist (Bertea 2000: 94). A peculiar cas limite is the reception of the picture book in Italy. Introduced thanks to the pioneering work of the Emme Edizioni publishing house and its translators, the genre was later rejected. Italy had to wait a decade to see the same and similar picture books republished, but it is still paying the price for having initially closed its borders, despite the fact that the translators had paid customs- and import duties. These were determined not only by the child image dominant in the Italian society, but also by the different image of the adult, who was meant to read picture books aloud and who was ready to put on a performance for the child recipient (Oittinen 2000). In particular, the article investigates examples of the discrepancy between the adult and child images of the source and target texts selected from American and English picture books and their Italian translations.

Keywords: children’s literature in Italy, picture book, reading aloud, translation

The republic of childhood

The conviction that children’s literature was comprehensible to every citizen of the “world republic of childhood” (Hazard 1944: 145), and thus could easily cross borders, not only geographical but also ideological, cul-
tural and political, spread widely in Europe after the Second World War. On the one hand, this utopian vision reflected an essential feature of books for children and teenagers, which, while keeping “alive a sense of nationality (...) also keep alive a sense of humanity” (Hazard 1944: 146); on the other hand, however, it rested on the assumption that there existed a universal, international, “monolingual, monocultural” children’s culture, “in which the international understanding is the order of the day” (O’Sullivan 2004: 146).

Although the notion of the “republic of childhood” reflects in part the “tremendous translation activity” (O’Connell 1999: 208) that has so far characterised literature – as early as in the 1930s Hazard pointed out that “every country gives and every country receives – innumerable are the exchanges” (1944: 146) – yet such an idea remains a “Romantic abstraction” (O’Sullivan 2005: 8), which not only fails to reflect the situation of, e.g., developing countries, but first and foremost “ignores the real conditions of children’s communication across borders” (O’Sullivan 2005: 8).

In fact, the emphasis on the internationality of children’s literature, and of the child image itself, neglects significant cultural aspects of translation and the movement of books across borders. Thus, one may well claim that children’s literature is like “a messenger that goes beyond mountains and rivers, beyond the seas, to the very ends of the world in search of new friendships” (Hazard 1944: 146), but one should not forget about the limitations and norms the translator should obey, especially in the case of children’s literature: “translating a book for children from one language into another is not as self-evident and spontaneous as it might seem, and the frontiers and custom houses do exist,” emphasizes Bertea, analyzing the English translations of Rodari (2000: 94; trans. M.B.).

And where there are frontiers and custom houses, one has to pay customs duties.

Open and closed borders: the picture book in Italy

The reception of the picture book in Italy has been quite special, since while initially this genre was allowed to cross the border freely, after some time it was “sent back.”

1 “although Hazard recognizes national features in the literatures of various groups and ascribes significances to them, he imagines a place of childhood which transcends all political and linguistic boundaries” (O’Sullivan 2004: 8).