

Remembering Delfina

By necessity, a writer's relationship with his translator is both intimate and distant—intimate in that no one reads a book as closely as its translator does, distant in that the gulf between languages is vast, the skill required to bridge that gulf daunting. It's often said that the knack for translation lies in the translator's knowledge of her own language as opposed to the language she translates from. This was not true in Delfina's case. On the contrary, I believe that her genius at translation owed less to her talent for kneading and manipulating Italian than to her acute ear for English, an uglier language if a more limber one. Italian, I am told, has a poorer vocabulary than English, which is in part why books in English tend to get longer when they are rendered into Italian. And yet for Delfina the limits of Italian were not obstacles; they were opportunities. A single, slightly scurrilous example, about which we later laughed, illustrates the point. In one of my early books I used the phrase "jerk-off party." Not sure what kind of party I was describing, Delfina asked around, found out, and immediately came up with an Italian equivalent: *festina seggaiola*. I doubt anyone would disagree that *festina seggaiola* is both funnier and more charming than the crude Anglo-Saxonism that inspired it.

Over the course of more than thirty years, Delfina translated all but two of my books into Italian. This was her choice, not mine. Her willingness to take on my work, which she didn't always like (and she was always frank in sharing her opinion with me), humbled me and made me grateful. I respect the effort she put into her art, the mental

gymnastics it necessitated as well as the pleasures it elicited, just as I appreciate how easy it was to talk with her, the generosity she showed not just in steeping herself, for months at a time, in my life, but in sharing with me her own, which was complex, sometimes troubled, often joyous and often blighted by pain. I wish she had written a novel or a memoir—about her complicated relationship with her own mother, or her passion for India (which I share), or the split identity (the Roman side, the Milanese side) that determined the impression she made, this glamorous woman with her gorgeously cut *tailleurs*, her Indian silk scarves glinting with tiny mirrors, the multitude of bangles on her wrists, the perfectly coiffed hair; in short, the contradiction that defined her, the exuberance that she drew from Rome and the discipline she drew from Milan. When I last saw her this past September, at a dinner given by our friends Vittorio Lingiardi and Luca Formenton, I recognized the toll that cancer had taken on her, how it had literally shrunk her, made her into a sort of miniature or doll of herself. And yet, though there was less of her, what there was was defiantly Delfina: the scarves, the bangles (now loose on her thin wrists), the chic *tailleur*. As always she seemed to carry a little of her beloved Goa with her, seemed to leave a trail of beach sand behind her when she crossed a Milanese salon. We ate, then went into Vittorio and Luca's living room for coffee, where she experienced a sudden spasm of pain. Vittorio rubbed her neck. It did not help. He looked worried. At his request, I rode with her in a taxi to her apartment, where the driver and I helped her out. I asked if she needed me to go upstairs with her. She said that she didn't. As we kissed each other on the cheek, I could tell that I had ceased, right then, to exist for her. Pain had erased me, as it had erased everything.

I'm sorry Delfina had to suffer in her death. I'm sorry to have lost her. Being neither Christian nor Hindu, being not spiritually inclined at all, I tend to imagine different afterlives for different people, choosing bits and pieces from this religion or that depending on my memories. In the case of Delfina I am inclined to turn to Theosophy, to the majestic figure of Madame Blavatsky during the years when she held court in Bombay, channeling (or so she claimed) the words of mysterious prophets in Tibet who promised not so much the ascension of the soul as its distillation and eventual dispersion. Delfina is dispersed now, her memory a warm element in which, as I write these words, I can soak. The particularity is gone, but the music of the bangles, like Madame Blavatsky's bells, sounds constantly, distant and close, loud and soft, coming from everywhere and nowhere.