ČASOPIS ZA KNJIŽEVNOST, KULTURU I KNJIŽEVNO PREVOĐENJE

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# Translating the Poet

"It is natural for a translator to be prejudiced towards his adopted work."

Horace Walpole

## Part I.

You want your author to be appreciated, to be read. Yes, why not, to be respected. As a writer at least, if not as a person. And the author's image, not just the work, is in your hands. That's the way it works in English at least, where translation tends to be decentralized. I'm not referring to commissions obviously. In that sense translation is like any kind of creative writing – you choose your project, you shape it, you develop it, you pitch and promote it, and you pitch and promote the image of the author that goes with it. So the question: what to do when your author is not an especially attractive character, not a good person, a bad husband, for instance, a bad father?

For instance, Eligio Zanini was a bad husband and a bad father. He abandoned his family when two children were small and a third was on the way. He never contacted them again, though he lived just down the road. When his son died in a car accident at the age of seventeen and the parents were supposed to go down to Split to retrieve the body, he didn't show up, though the boy's mother, Bianca, held out hope until the last minute. She was devastated by her husband's departure and carried the wound as if fresh inside her.

She still has it in her old age, says her daughter, despite the fact that he beat her when they were young. The children felt his willful absence from the beginning of their lives, she says. It marked them as children, as adolescents, and, for the ones who made it that far, as adults. Then he married a second time and did it again, with another wife and two other children, leaving them with the same abrupt, categorical sweep of the hand, just down the road. "I'm sorry to tell you these things. They might spoil the beautiful poetry for you," she says. The sea is behind her – she

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insisted on giving me the view, the Gulf of Trieste from the top of San Giusto. It is that “other sea” that Claudio Magris describes, the lake known as Adriatica, site of my poet’s work. And life.

Biancastella, now sixty-one, is his first daughter, his eldest child. She has no memory of him as a father and saw him just three times in her life. She tells me about each meeting, all awkward, none lasting more than a few minutes. She owns the rights to his works with her siblings, who’ve given her power of attorney, but she hasn’t read them all. Some of the poetry, yes, but not the memoir of his imprisonment. She can’t bring herself to read that, she says, not yet. She tells me how she got her unusual name. He’d been arrested and was being shipped off to Goli otok, Tito’s gulag for political prisoners, when his wife had managed to contact him with the news that she was pregnant. What should she name the baby, she asked? If it was a boy, he said, Giordano Bruno, the heretic, and if it was a girl, Stella Bianca, white star, “because,” he said, “they no longer believe in the red one here.” Her mother had softened the message slightly, while respecting her husband’s wishes, and flipped the two words for her daughter’s name, creating Biancastella in the process, Starwhite.

Clifford Landers, in a book on translation practice, claims that translators have an obligation – a moral obligation, I think he says – to prevent their authors from looking foolish in English. He recommends that they correct errors of fact: for instance, if an author has written that El Paso is in California or Paso Robles in Texas, or if she’s mistaken the age of one of her characters in a long novel that covers a lot of time, or made a grammatical error, or written something in the supposed voice of an English-speaking character that sounds especially un-English. Fix them, he says. Don’t let your author look like she’s not in control of her own work, don’t let her look ridiculous. He doesn’t say how translators should handle more serious faults, faults of character, for instance, moral transgressions, bigotry, perversion.

When I was asked by Christopher Merrill a couple of years ago to translate a poem by Radovan Karadžić, the Serbian war criminal, who had just been captured and sent to The Hague for trial, I hesitated. He wanted it fast, first of all, journalism time, overnight. You never know what that will do to a poem, but that wasn’t the main thing. The poem wasn’t bad, but the man clearly was, or would be, eventually, in the years after he wrote it. Eventually he would be responsible for the deaths of thousands, for concentration camps and rape camps and an entire campaign of ethnic cleansing

the likes of which Europe at least had not seen since the Nazis. What would I be responsible for in translating his work? I couldn't help recalling the story of the Italian edition of Mein Kampf, for the translation of which the publisher Valentino Bompiani, in one of the supreme ironies of that hateful book's dissemination in the world, had hired a Jew.

Karadzic had sent the poem, tucked inside one of his books, to the International Writing Program, hoping to get himself invited, it seems. It was typed on a piece of onion skin paper, with a signature, the name of a Serbian magazine, Književna reč, and a date written in pencil at the bottom of the second page – May, 1974. I found it striking, in part, for its resonance with what the man would do later and realized that, for that kind of observation to make sense to Chris or to his listeners on PRI's The World or anywhere else, for that matter, I would need to translate it. It was just one poem, I told myself.

A Morning Bomb

At last I am lost to all benefactors,

I burn like a cigarette between neurotic lips,
while they look for me everywhere – I wait in the dawn's ambush
for the enormous occasion of leaving it all once and for all,
all the wondrous possibilities the savior offers me:
I rush to drop a morning bomb on a lonely man –
in a sudden slash of delightless mood.

On the hill a snatch of sleep and a glass of clear water wait for me,
a poison mushroom and a viper sharply sworn,
the clean closeness of the sky and a tense wind,
a blood-soaked kinsman in an ambush of pure death,
unforeseeable blue, Elijah's stakes, windswept hilltops,
the deer-like fate of supple Cyclopes, a sure fate –
but I am carried away by the formula of nothingness, the idea of non-sleep,
I leap to drop a morning bomb that casts its spells
in a magic eye above the town and onto a professor's happiness,
though my anxious sweetheart waits, along with a scholar's life.

I can look for myself in sad, empty spaces,
strangle the rebellion of my beast in my blood,
just as I find myself on the ceiling of a church – I can go to sleep,
or wake up pierced at dawn on the barroom's altar,
I can share my solitude with the river that flows peacefully
filled with mythic fish and a calm that is unattainable from without,
so much solitude that I seize it for myself alone and the evening,
and seek out stocks of gold, the secrets of manganite,
and come to love seeing right through the Earth's crust,
mild towards all and a gentleman at the end
peacefully resolve the mystery of mysteries, and then
all night on the square of darkness shine with good:
but I rush to drop the morning bomb of laughter
beneath the left breast of this perfected century.

Or I could, all in robes, dream of Chinese rain,
lean my head against the moon goggling in the field
full of bluish star flowers, a noose of thoughts,
follow the bees buzzing, transparent, open to all
and, filled with the faith of the great magus, wait prone:
look – evening is falling on the Eskimo's tongue, god shakes the branches,
a pair of lovers disappears behind the high school and a dog –
But I go into the magma of the night in anticipation
of dawn, to squirt through all the hidden holes and into all of it
a morning bomb of laughter, a torrent of disbelief.

Now, there is something in the strange appeal of this that I would say is attached to an old idea about greatness, a Greek idea, the ancient kind. It's been perverted plenty over the centuries, but it persists. It's why some Serbs will see Karadžić as a hero still, and this poem as consistent with his heroic exploits. His greatness. And in making the poem effective in English in that light, available to

those who would like to see him and it as great, I bear some of the responsibility. It has always seemed to me highly disingenuous of those translators who want to claim that their work is writing, or re-writing, to then step back at certain uncomfortable moments and say, in effect, “That’s not me, that’s just what the text says.” It’s almost but not quite as bad as commenting on one’s own translation as if someone else had written it, providing sly compliments to oneself all the while: in my third magnificent line, I have the following… The panorama of Karadžić’s actions accords with the ample voice of the poem, the sweeping away of moral boundaries, Raskolnikov-like, the mad laughter in the face of all those people searching for him everywhere. He’s not afraid of them. He will destroy them all, pouring torrents of disbelief into all their hiding holes. And who has created that voice in English? I have.

But the question of protecting one’s author from looking foolish, from looking ridiculous seems to slide to one side here, and I doubt many people would find me culpable if I didn’t give full voice to the insipiently sick character I see holding forth in the poem. I write,

*“and, filled with the faith of the great magus, wait prone,”*

but I could instead make it,

*“and, being satiated with a belief system of a great magician, I’m waiting, lying flat.”*

In other words, knowing that looking ridiculous, not being taken seriously is the thing that such a greatness-hungry character fears most, I could make him look ridiculous, at least as a poet, by creating a flabby line and by diffusing the whole poem’s poeticity.

Or why not something like this, if I really think he’s a Nazi: “und, being satiated mit ze systembelief of ze ur-magus, ich bin waiting, lyink low”?

These and other vocal options are all available to me as part of the expressive, rhetorical side of translation. Coming up with a strategy for how best to craft an effective and compelling work, an authorial image and voice, in English is, I think, the most challenging part of translating, far more so than the technical side of learning the language, for instance. This is translation as writing.

It may not be the simpatico affair that Lawrence Venuti describes and criticizes, where you assimilate yourself to another's character, matching affinities such that you might mimic, even perhaps channel her or his words and thoughts. But even far short of that, (1) you take this on or no one does, and (2) in taking it on, you sidle up next to him, as it were, try on his garments, so to speak, once in a while, even if only in the privacy of your own office, glancing back at yourself as if from the mirror of the words you've put on the screen, you and not you. If not boon companions, at least close acquaintances between whom an agreement, more marriage than contract: I promise to listen to you, not provided that, or on condition that. And not pretend to listen, as I'm reading the paper, or watching TV, or thinking my own thoughts. I know that you want me to hear what you're not saying, too, what you don't even know you're not saying, because it's so much a part of your life and thoughts it would never even enter your head that I wouldn't get it already, even before you started to say it. I will do my best. I will listen, you can trust me to listen, not for some purpose of my own, not because I want to twist your words to my own ends, but for themselves, for their own sake.

This is why I would never translate more of Radovan Karadžić's work. I don't want to listen to him like that. I don't want to make that promise to try. But I did, or I thought I did, with Ligio Zanini. Why, you may ask?

No grand sweep of history here, no large ideas, no shaking of the fist at fate or one's enemies, imagined or real, just poetry thick with the spirit of place:

El cucal Filéipo

In sta zurnada da maltenpo

a ma suven ca lasu 'n Siruoco
xi 'óun cucal fra tanti,
saruo 'l martéin de l'ano passa,
ca ogni giuorno a ma spieta.

Sul sico da Cunvarsari
o su quil de la Taronda,
su la fóusa da Gustéigna

o su quila del Purier
el xi senpro préima da méi.

El xi biel, nito e grando;
dóuto ‘l santo giuorno
el x’in lavur cun li satuléine
contro vento e curantéia
par stame rente, par vidame meo.

I ga favielo e dóuto ‘l capéisso,
a sa vido ch’el patéisso
parchi a ga manca la paruola
e cui uciti el ma conta, a méi ch’i sie,
cossa ca xi la fan.

Cu i lu ciamo Filéipo
za ‘l sa liva par ciapa ‘l pissito,
uciando par divierse méie,
ca nu séio ‘óun cuncurente
pióun svielto d’ingurgaghe ‘l bucon.

Suovi xi i ribunséini,
li dunzalite e li maréincule,
féin ch’el sul va a li basse,
féin ca sassio e cuntento
el pol sbula par li suove.

E méi, in quila sira,
i turno cun bai pissi
e cul racuordo d’óuna bona cunpanéia.

When I read this, when I first read it, saw it on the page, I found it both seductively familiar and frustratingly incomprehensible, an effect I have tried to recreate in at least one translated version of the poem (see below).

It was, I think, 1993. I was in Croatia on a Fulbright, visiting Istria, exploring its history, languages, cultures. The country at the time was divided, a large part blocked off by Serbs in the Krajina region to the south. I was living in Zagreb, but I had bought a car from a previous Fulbrighter for five hundred American dollars, a Renault 4 made in Slovenia ten years before the war. Sea-washed green with the tell-tale 3-gear shift on the dash, it could probably squeeze out a 100 km an hour, if the road was flat. But, first things first, it needed an overhaul. At a local shop in Zagreb, Zlatko the mechanic told me he could do the job if he only had the parts. Two days later, I handed them over, having taken the train five hours to Trieste, sought out a Croatian-owned auto parts store, purchased everything I needed, which Zlatko had kindly listed on a scrap of paper for me, and returned by the evening – this all sounds much easier than it was. I think Zlatko was as surprised then as I am looking back now.

She was no beauty, but now she purred, as much as a Renault 4 can, thanks to Zlatko's careful work, and I spent weekends driving to the towns along the coast of Istria and on the interior – Plomin, Pazin, Buje, Motovun, Labin, Pula, Poreč, Grožnjan, Buzet, Majmajola, magical hilltop towns, serene, picturesque villages. I was captivated by the look of the place first, the gentle rise at the center of each little hammock, where a Venetian bell tower invariably stood surrounded by an intricate lacework of calli worn smooth by centuries of pedestrians.

The tensions were more palpable in Zagreb, which was crowded with journalists covering the on-going war in Bosnia from the closest they cared to get to it, and relief workers from the UNHCR, and UNPROFOR soldiers from a dozen different countries, not to mention the countless Croatian soldiers on duty and off who filled the streets. The airwaves were clogged with political rhetoric as the country tried to shake itself free from the Yugoslav past all while fighting an internal war and securing its own borders, and while all this was quite stimulating – there was a constant sense of something about to happen and in thirty minutes you could be at the front, even in my car – it was also exhausting. Istria, on the other hand, in addition to its serene beauty, had seen no fighting, not since the end of WWII. It was depressed from lack of tourists but not at war. It was also the home

of an independence movement of sorts, the Istrian Democratic Union, whose regionalist rhetoric I found refreshing – a celebration of Istriannness first, which meant locals with that distinctive blend of cultures that made the place a kind of homecoming to me from the start.

And it was on one of these trips that I discovered, by chance or by someone's recommendation – I no longer remember which – in the Center for Historical Research in the town of Rovinj, amid nearly 100,000 volumes mostly dedicated to Istria, my poet.

I was not ignorant. I learned as much about him as I could. He'd been an anti-fascist, I knew, a supporter of Yugoslavia's annexation of Istria after the war. He'd chosen to remain behind when most of his friends had left, taking over as the principal of a school at the age of just twenty-three because all the older teachers were gone. He'd been arrested after Tito's break with Stalin in 1948, along with thousands of others, and sent to Goli otok. Stalinists, anti-communists, Party members, dissidents, political prisoners of all kinds were sent to the island to serve out their terms at hard labor. There were executions; there was torture. Zanini spent nearly five years there.

Once released, he wasn't allowed to go back to the classroom, of course not, he was a persona non grata, for another ten years, and soon after that he'd retired to Rovinj, where he fished and wrote for the rest of his life: seven books of dialectal poetry, an autobiographical novel about his time in prison, a book of essays on fish.

These things I knew, and Ligio Zanini was for me a part of a vision of Istria first of all, the spirit of a place, a dissident, a staunch anti-nationalist who had chosen to step back from the grand sweep of history and express himself in an idiom that few would understand. He must have just died when I first discovered El Cucal, which settled into my image of the place and him in the place for a good long stay.

When his daughter, some fifteen years later, expressed her fear that she might spoil the beautiful poetry for me by narrating her version of his life, I reassured her. Of course I could separate the man from his work. What kind of unsophisticated reader did she think I was? And anyway we weren't talking about a monster like Karadžić. I could easily name half a dozen writers whose politics, beliefs, or personal lives I found somehow wanting but whose works I admired nevertheless.

But it hadn't quite sunk in yet. That promise I had made to listen maybe I could fulfill, but those garments of his I'd been trying on now and again, that voice I'd been working hard to give him? I wasn't sure about that at all. It suddenly felt like almost a betrayal, as if you had just noticed that the person you'd been dating for the past six weeks and who was always super sweet to you, treated the diner waitress like a piece of shit. Only, that is just a sign of a kind of moral ugliness that might lurk in a great mass under the surface of her character, the part you can see. Maybe it's not a great mass. Maybe it's just a dirty little corner that you could say the right few words to suddenly shed light on and clean up for good.

This was more serious. "Lig," I felt like saying – in the conversational idiom we've developed to address each other – "Lig, what's the matter with you!? I've been listening. But you haven't been telling me everything!"

You might think about an annulment at this point, claim that he introduced himself under false pretenses (even if his writer's biography is actually rather honest by comparison with many of his peers), but it's far too late for that: your union has been sanctioned by the National Endowment for the Arts. You've met the family. They're all expecting something, perhaps not greatness, perhaps just the mundane details of everyday life, convivenza, living together. At the very least: offspring.

Should I be sorry if, in some ways at least, they favor me more than him?

## Part II. Voices

Poems in different languages are always radically different, even if one is a translation of the other. Alliteration, rhyme, meter, and so on, are the metrics we use to talk about these radically different things, in the same way that someone might compare apples with oranges. In terms of the formal metrics available, a translated poem might be relatively the same as the source. But this kind of comparison always neglects the sound, perhaps the most important part of a poem. One is a poem in Rovignese (let's say), the other a poem in English (let's say). When you listen to one, you hear Rovignese poetry; when you listen to the other, you hear the English poetry. When people translate a poem, the very first thing they do, almost always, is rip it from its source language

sounds. For any poem this is devastating, for a dialectal poem, especially so. Even a dialectal poem as apparently tame as this, a story about a bird viewed from a boat.

The strategy was to try, first, to suggest the sounds of the source, letting semantic coherence fly out the window, initially at least: an exercise in homophonic translation to give the sounds primary place in the English poetry. But then the sounds started to shape themselves in my ear, apparently according to some internalized order associated with what I had learned, and I wondered: would it be possible to interject something of the poet's life – not the political life so much but more the private one, the one that was bothering me a bit in Part I. of this essay – into these apparently pure sound paintings? An activist homophonic translation of sorts, akin to some feminist experimental ones, and one that might just make me feel a little better.

Here, then, is Zanini's dedication to the book:

A dout'i cucai

del Livante
cume del Punente
e ai canaréini
c' a vol nassi
ogni giuorno
finendola
d'inbinidéi
i santi, marsi
par massa binidissioni

And three possible renderings, one after the sound (as shaped by the life), and second after the sense, and a third, blended somewhat, with an attempt at something of the dialectal richness of the source, inflected by the play of the homophonic rendering.

1.

A doubty Cool, all

belly vaunted,
cometh L, spoonin' many.

Hey, icon, your
cave's all nasty.
You are no
fine and dandy
dinger any day.
Ask Auntie Marcie.
Parnassus Bein' Editions

2.

To all the gulls
of the east wind
and the west
and to the canaries
who want to be born
every day
having done with
being blessed by
the saints, spoiled
by too many blessings

3.

T'all th' gulls
a th' easterly
an' th' west
an' to th' canaries
who wanna be birtht
ev'ry day
all an' done with

th' blessin'
a saints, spoilt
by excess blessin'

The first of these might suggest something of L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E, or perhaps, zaum, but it is, either way, only preliminary to the meaningful sound combinations of the poem itself, and to the "sense-based" translations that accompany it. They work together, the first defamiliarizing by means of an approximation of Zanini's own chosen sounds against an English backdrop, the second settling back comfortably into a nest of familiar combinations and conventional meaning, and the third reaching out again slightly.

Perhaps an entire collection on this basis would not hold together, I don't know. As a trial – let's call it cohabitation – poem number one from the collection, whose source was quoted above.

1.

L Cool, All Flayer Beau

E'en star. Sure, not a damn-all ten but

a massive hunk o' bassoon, sheer rock, oh,
th' One Cool all fraught on tea,
sorrow more day, the longest of 'em,
called only giorno, a mass o' pieta.

Sue'll see 'm come, very sorry,
oh, Sue, quell that ol' rombus!
Sue, laugh at th' goose, stay in ya!
Oh, Sue… Well, a little later.
L's a scent-propelled preyer, I'll tell.

LZ be L, neat egger on doe.
Doe-lover L, santo? Oh, no.

LZ be lover: Comely sat Susie,
cores and troves in tow, echoed run of terrier,
parched as a mare apart. Fitting meows.

Aghaf, L owed Al all his pay, so
avid as an oak -- partayyy!
Party. A game on call up, a rolla',
a gooey you-cheat'n L. Come. Tadah. Makes you see
the coursing of eel. A fam man.

A gooey Luke, ya know? Flayer beau.
Leaves a pair o' chips, all piss eato.
Each and apart diverse, a may-ya
can ya say, oh. One can't cure Auntie's boy
o' bendin' his beau-toad o'r gargled bacon.

Sue wove easy, roved sanely.
Gyawd. And she saw Lee dayly, man in a cooler
vein. Hell, Sue'll volley bocce,
feign casa, si – oh ache and rent!
L-balls'll blah-parley Sue. Oyvey.

And me, in queer Assyria,
I turn a can by pissy
echo, rack order, don boon company.

2.

Philip the Seagull (El cucal Filéipo)

On this inclement afternoon

I'm reminded that down there in the south wind
is one gull among the others

– it could be the yearling of a year ago –
who waits each day for me

In the shallows of Cunvarsari
or Taronda
In the gulley of Gusteigna
or Purier
he is always before me

He's grand, white and clean
the whole day long
he works, clamoring
against the wind and current
to be near me, see me better

I speak to him and he understands everything
and it's clear he suffers
because he has no words
and with his little eyes he tells me, who knows only too well
what hunger is

The moment I call him Philip
he's already rising in flight to take the tiny fish
checking the radius of several miles
for some rival
more agile at swallowing the mouthful

But his are the pale perches
the little wrasses, red-cheeked, rainbowed
until the sun goes down
until sated content
he flies away home

And I that night
come home with good fish
and the memory of good company

3.

Philip th' Gull (El cucal Filéipo)

This blust'ry mid-day
I'm remembered that down in th' Southerly
one gull's among th' other'n
– oughta be last year's yearlin' –
who waits ev'ry day for me.

In th' shoals a Cunvarsar'
or Taronda
in th' gulley a Gusteigna
or Purier
he's alway afore me.

He's grand, white, unfoul'd.
All th' day long
he works, clamorin'
'gainst th' wind an' swell
to be aside me, see me better.

I speak to 'n and he minds it all
an' it's clear 'nuff he suffers
'cause he's got no words
An' with 'n's little eye he tells me, who minds all well
what hunger be.

When I call ‘n Philip
he’s risin’ awing to grab th’ little fish
checkin’ a circle a miles
for some rival
quicker at swallowin’ th’ mouthful.

But his be th’ pale perch,
th’ little wrass, red-cheeked, rainbow’d
‘til th’ sun set
‘til full an’ content
he flies on home.

An’ I, that e’en,
come aberth with good fish
an’ th’ mem’ry a good fellowship.

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